

SAENAI HEROINE NO SODATEKATA

VOLUME 5

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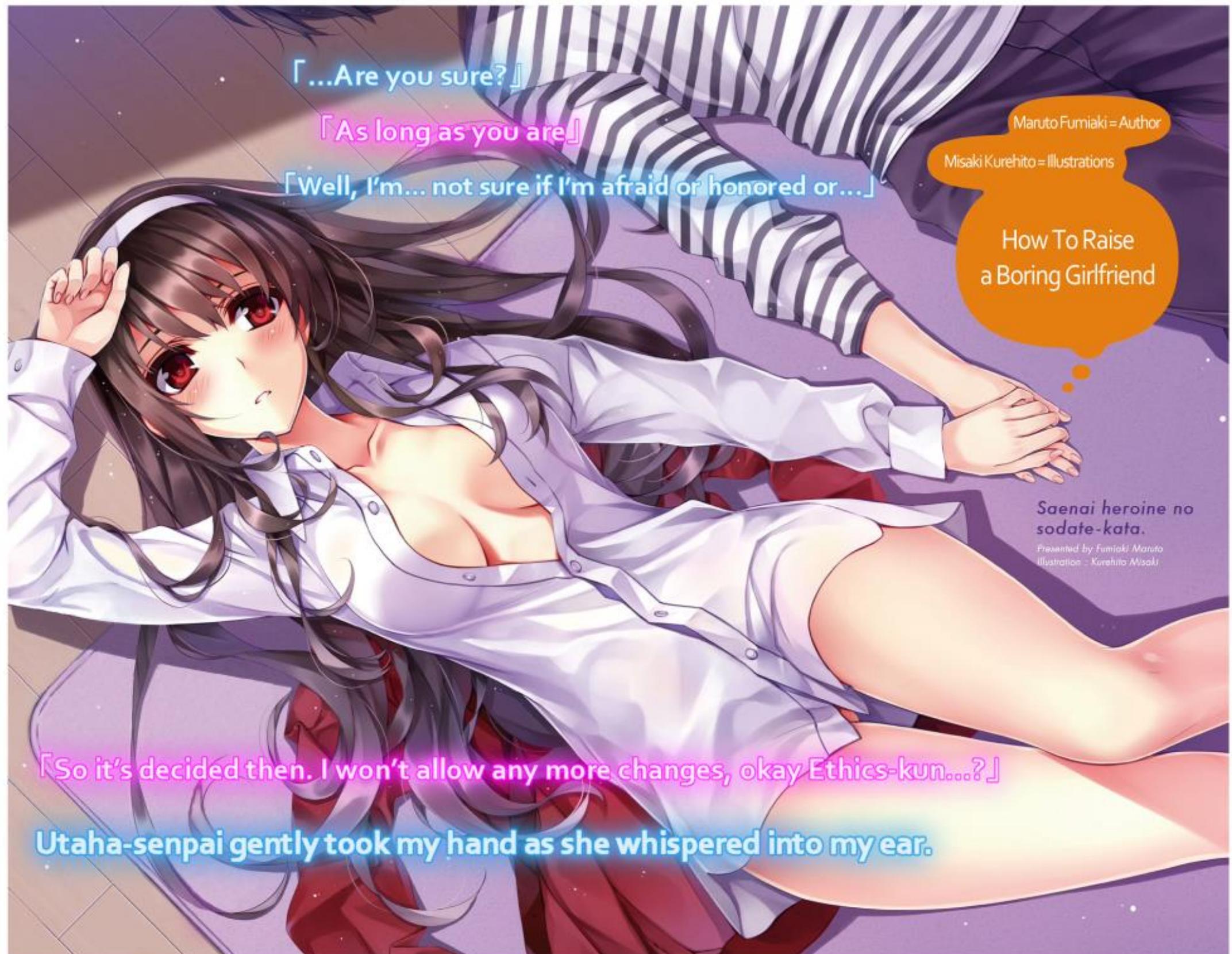
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「...Are you sure?」

「As long as you are」

「Well, I'm... not sure if I'm afraid or honored or...」

Maruto Fumiaki = Author

Misaki Kurehito = Illustrations

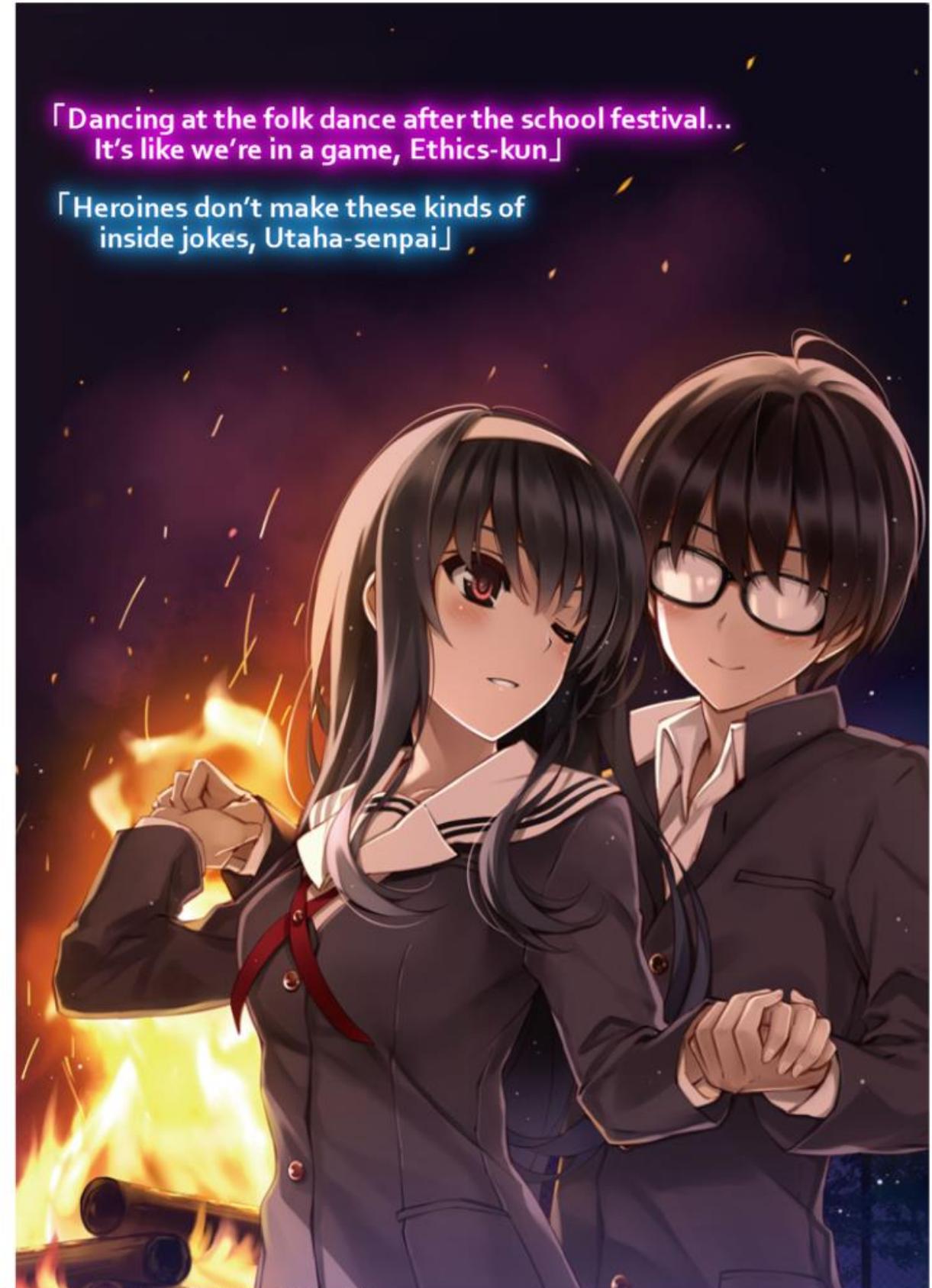
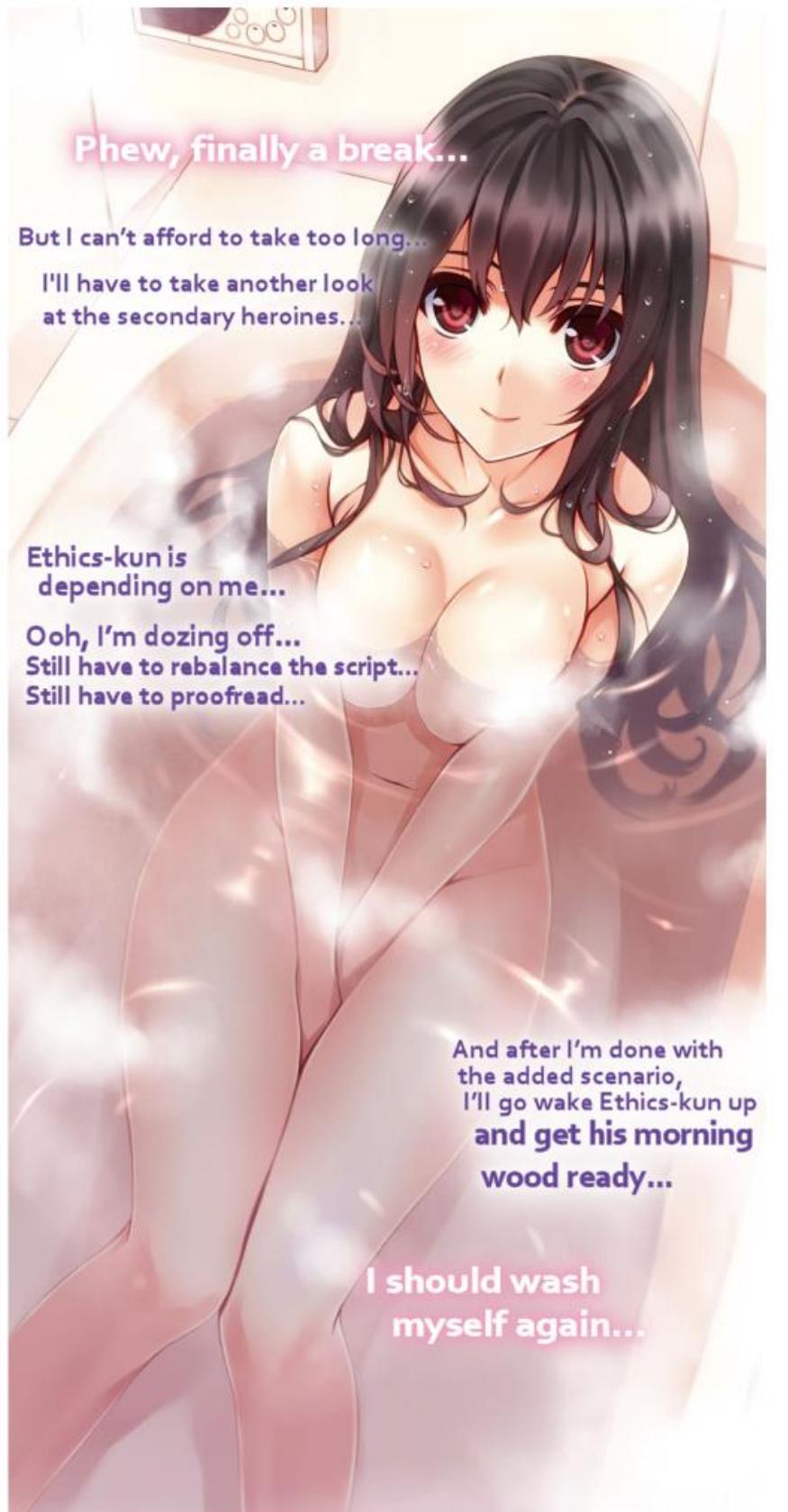
How To Raise
a Boring Girlfriend

Saenai heroine no
sodate-kata.

Presented by Fumiaki Maruto
Illustration : Kurehito Misaki

「So it's decided then. I won't allow any more changes, okay Ethics-kun...?」

Utaha-senpai gently took my hand as she whispered into my ear.



▼ 原画・グラフィッカー



▼ シナリオ



▼ 音楽



blessing software

メンバーネーム

▼ 企画・プロデューサー・
ディレクター



▼ メインヒロイン



Saenai heroine no sodate-kata.5

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PROLOGUE

The crimson evening sunlight shining into the AV room after school was laced with an early November chill.

"Thanks for all the hard work on the scenario!"

Those sincere words warmed up the otherwise cold room.

Wait, a surprisingly optimistic prologue for once?!

"That's right. So you can leave the rest to *us* as you work on your new light novel. Goodbye, Kasumigaoka Utaha – *forever*."

But the good vibes vanished as a certain golden-haired twintailed tsundere swept in like the chilly late-autumn wind.

"How rude of you, Sawamura-san. Don't come crying and begging on your knees a month from now when you can't meet the deadline."

Now *this* is more like what I'm used to.

A girl with long, black hair delivered those acidic words, her expression and tone equally disinterested.

"Oh, I'm hurt. Someone's finally concerned about your well-being and this is how you treat them? It's no wonder they say all authors are eccentric, narrow-minded and generally bankrupt of character."

"I think we should be more concerned about illustrators who escape to anime, games and comics while pretending the deadline won't come back to smack them in the face?"

"Can we not fight on this joyful occasion? Please?"

I guess it's once again time to introduce the two ladies squaring off in their usual places from opposite corners of the room.

In this corner, we have the anime, games and comics escapist, who draws faster and more beautifully the more desperate things become — also known as the renowned illustrator Kashiwagi Eri, the half-English, half-Japanese, golden-hair-and-twintailed student in my grade: Sawamura Spencer Eri.

In the other corner, we have the eccentric, narrow-minded, bankrupt-of-character writer of bone-chilling plots and creator of terrifying characters — the amazing novelist Kasumi Utako, better known as the long-and-black-haired upperclassman: Kasumigaoka Utaha-senpai.

But of course, this prologue wouldn't be complete without a self-introduction. And so — the man who will combine Japan's hundred most potable springs¹ and Mo**michi's² olive oil³, also the representative of the little-known doujin circle 「blessing software」 : Aki Tomoya.

This is the story of passionate otaku fighting to revive a dying trade.

Riding a wave of neo-eroticism and cultivating their own unique brand of moe and passion, their virtually unknown group developed into one of the "shutter circles"⁴ in a matter of a few conventions. Their drive, mutual trust and love were eventually captured in the form of a light novel.

...But we'll put aside that daydream for now.

The subject of today's meeting was not one of the usual agendas — sudden and unexpected trouble, the pushing back of deadlines, or the alleged embezzlement of production funds — but to finally commemorate Utaha-senpai's completion of all the game's scenarios.

Unfortunately...

"Your petty provocations mean nothing to me. Now that the scenarios have been completed, there's absolutely no place left for you in this circle. So would you kindly take your leave, Kasumigaoka Utaha – I mean, Kasumigaoka-se-n-pa-i?"

Will these two ever stop?

¹ *Meisui Hyakusen* in the original text – a list of the hundred most drinkable springs & streams in Japan, designated by the Ministry of Environment.

² Hayami Mokomichi – actor, model and cook with an unhealthy obsession towards olive oil.

³ Expression based on a proverb shared by both languages – "like oil and water".

⁴ Designation given to the most popular doujin circles at events like the Comiket, a level above the "wall circles".

"Are you sure that's alright with you, Sawamura-san? If you drive me away now, who are you going to turn to when you're completely destroyed later on?"

"What nonsense. There's no chance of *that* happening."

The tension between the two would only rise as the evening dragged on.

"Sup, Tomo! I've got a new song~"

The door of the AV room suddenly flew open, and a loud, cheerful voice reverberated throughout.

"Mi, Michiru?!"

"Man, Toyogasaki's *really* far. I left right after school and it's already evening!"

In the doorway was a girl slinging a guitar dressed in a huge ribbon as well as the eye-catchingly white uniform of a different school. She was completely drenched in sweat despite the cold, and her short hair seemed to rustle as she grinned at me.

"Forget that, what're you doing here on a weekday?"

"Oh, I just had this *sudden urge* to compose last night, so you just *have* to hear it today."

The archenemy of otaku everywhere (especially those of the same sex) and puller of heartstrings, our anisong writer and vocalist of the rock band 「icy tail」, and also my cousin of the same age: Mitchie, or more accurately, Hyoudou Michiru.

"Couldn't you have just sent me an audio file?"

"You just don't get it, do you, Tomo? It's different when you play it live. Wait till you listen to this."

"Well, it's not going to be live in the game!"

"Aww, don't sweat the small stuff. One, and..."

"O...Oi, Michiru!"

As if to prove her point, my cousin sat on top of a desk and cradled her guitar, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding atmosphere.

She sat cross-legged, of course, which made the muscular thighs barely concealed by the hem of her skirt all the more obvious.



"..."

"..."

And at that instant, the air in the room, which had been so heated just a moment ago, froze over. And over. And over. And over again.

"God, why can't you just stand and play? Or at least sit on a chair and play?"

"Eh, but I don't wannaaaaaaaaaa."

"Look, I'm really happy that you wrote a new song for me, but playing it now would be just a little too much. Besides, we wouldn't want Uncle getting worried over you staying out late again, right?"

"Aww, can't I just stay over for tonight? My clothes are still in your room."

"Not... Not so fast, Hyoudou Michiru!"

Eriri's distinctive voice cut in like diamond dust.

She really has a thing for full names, huh?

"You can't keep showing up like this! And in that uniform!"

"Oh no problem, I always tell security that I'm here for a joint practice and they let me in."

Michiru's craftiness and nerve are second to none.

Her grades still suck though.

"Anyway, it's not like I'm not a circle member like everybody else. No need to be so cold."

"But..."

"In any case, I'm still not interested in this otaku thing, but Tomo said he just *had* to have me no matter what, so I have no choice but to get along with the rest of you."

"I... Well, he said that to me too!"

I did? Did I?

Wait, why does it even matter?

"What happens if circle activities get suspended because you keep sneaking in like this? How are you gonna answer for it then, huh?"

"Aw, come on, there's no way that'll happen. Not unless we suddenly decide to engage in weird sexual activities or something."

That escalated from illegal entry pretty quickly.

"What would a non-otaku like *you* know anything about eroge scenes in school?"

And you, Miss Doujin Illustrator, are being too conservative.

"I don't get it. You two can email your drawings and scripts too, so why meet up?"

"Ah... Um... Well you know, we're in the same school and we live kinda close..."

"And I'm family..."

"Nnnnnnnnnnnn-Ka, Kasumigaoka Utaha!"

"See, Sawamura-san, I believe I did warn you about crying and begging me for help?"

And so the crying Nobi... Eriri, unable to withstand any more damage, tapped out and was replaced by Dora... Utaha-senpai⁵.

Weren't those two fighting just a moment ago?

"You know Hyoudou-san, I've really come to appreciate your enthusiasm and you bending your principles to accommodate the rest of us."

"Nah, I couldn't be bothered to do it if it were for you."

"Right, so that's why we don't want you to feel like we're forcing you anymore. Feel free to leave when you're done playing."

I wouldn't be surprised if you told me Utaha-senpai had the Wh*te A*bum⁶ on.

"Isn't that to my convenience?"

"Or, in other words, to conduct or to appear to conduct oneself in a manner most beneficial to themselves, usually at the expense of others."⁷

"...What're you trying to say?"

⁵ Eriri is Nobita and Utaha is Doraemon from, well, *Doraemon*.

⁶ Ultra-powerful armor from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, see *JoJo's Bizarre Encyclopedia*.

⁷ In the original text, Michiru uses the word "勝手" which roughly means "at my convenience" but doesn't translate nicely into a single English word. Utaha then retorts with a dictionary definition.

"What I'm saying, Hyoudou-san, is that the foundation of the circle is the group, not the individual."

"Well that's pretty obvious. I do come from a band you know."

"But of course. The vocalist is always the center of attention."

"...I won't understand if you keep beating around the bush like that, *Senpai*."

"Then I'll get straight to the point. Yes, you're part of a team, but one where you step all over others to reach the top."

"What?!"

A far cry from Eriri's disorganized and emotionally charged ranting, Utaha-senpai's more calculated and logical approach had Michiru visibly pinned down.

...Well, both arguments were pretty emotional, but the difference in effect was clear to see.

But just as Utaha-senpai, wielding her sophistries, prepared to finish her opponent off for good...

"That's pretty rich coming from somebody who manipulates her editor as she pleases."

"And I guess I was mistaken for assuming you wouldn't backstab me like the loser you are, Sawamura-san."

...She forgot about the fire still smoldering behind her.

Those two really make a great tag team.

"Hey, Katou."

"Hmm? What is it, Aki-kun?"

As ice and fire raged on in their epic battle in the middle of the AV room, I gave the girls the slip as soon as I could. I sought refuge by the windows, where the last member of our circle observed — no, she couldn't even be bothered to do that — remained absorbed in her smartphone.

"What do you keep doing on your phone? I've been meaning to ask you for quite a while."

"Oh, I've been playing Pu**** & Dragons⁸. See?"

"Wow, thanks for that stale answer."

⁸ *Puzzle & Dragons*. Wow, that was a really long time ago.

There sat a ponytailed and eternally non-confrontational girl who had arrived even earlier than me today.

A natural at being ignored, no one could ever be bothered to pick a fight with this Classmate B. They say "I think, therefore I am", but then I'm not sure she does much thinking at all.

Working behind the scenes at — no, 「blessing software」's main heroine and scripter-in-training: Katou "I Will Not Get Rid of My Ponytail" Megumi.

"Well, any member of an otaku circle has to play games every once in a while."

"But we're a niche galge-making circle. We can't be seen touching mass-appeal products."

She always speaks with a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Certain micro-expressions and nuances, sometimes a little devilish, sometimes a little halfhearted — I don't think I'll ever be able to figure this girl out.

"Well, anyway, I guess it's a good thing that the scenario's finally sorted out."

"Yep. Now, it's *our* turn to do battle this final month."

"I guess it would be good if we could make Winter Comiket."

"Oh, we will. I'll make sure of it."

The way she speaks can really put me at ease sometimes, though.

There's no chance she would ever conflict with or conspire against the other members, and I always feel like I can talk to her truthfully about our circle.

"By the way, you've really let it grow out, huh?"

"Oh, you mean my hair?"

But I can't afford to be satisfied with the current state of affairs.

I created this circle with the intent to make Katou a main heroine who would steal the hearts of all.

That kind of "I turned around and she was there"⁹ safe, stable and conservative tea-drinking heroine simply wouldn't do.

"Losing the short ponytail means that you've cheapened your character even further, Katou."

"Hmm... But isn't a ponytail supposed to be like, you know, what's it called? A 'moe' point? I think?"

⁹ Reference to a gos Japanese drama of the name 「振り返ればヤツがいる」 .

"...You're not nearly sly enough to use it."

And so I once again reaffirmed my commitment to transform the 3D Katou into the virtual bishoujo Kanou Meguri.

"Besides, how do you expect me make you 'moe' if you keep changing your hairstyle like that?"

"Aki-kun, your unreasonable standards aside, I wish you would stop treating my hair like your plaything."

"Well, it's your fault for tying your hair in a ponytail in the first place. People can't resist pulling on dangling ropes, you know?"

"That's obviously an exaggeration, Aki-kun."

"It's true! I can resist a short ponytail, but any longer and I'd find myself pulling yours..."

"Sigh."

Right now, Katou's hair is at the perfect length.

It's so easy to grasp, run through, and comb that I was playing with it before I knew it.

"...Say, Katou, did you know that your hair is meant to be swirled around your fingers?"

"Never mind that, Aki-kun, but remember what I said about playing with my hair?"

"Hmm?"



"Everybody's looking this way, Aki-kun."

"Mm... Huh? Oh. Ooooooooooooh."

I... hadn't noticed.

"...Wh...Why are you treating her hair like it's yours?!"

"...Are you trying to validate your existence as a creepy otaku?"

"...Even normal couples would be embarrassed about doing *that*."

"Eh..."

It appears that the riotous AV room had reverted to its original, noiseless state some time ago...

"Well first of all, I'd like to know how both of you even got this close!"

"You should just die now that you've discarded your ethics, Ethics-kun."

"Wow. Now I'm really angry. So angry I don't know why I'm angry. Hmpf. Co-eds."

"G...Girls, please! This is all a mistake!"

Their eyes stared daggers as they mistook my benign otaku idiosyncrasies for the lust of a normal teenage boy.

So *this* is how you create a misunderstanding...

Or so I thought as I began to tremble in fear.

"Ah well, I guess I'll have to do something about this, Aki-kun."

"Ka...Katou?"

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that my savior would come in the form of the girl standing next to me. I watched, spellbound, as she stepped boldly between me and the other three. As she regarded them with her usual flat gaze, she very austerely declared:

"Um, well, in times like these, I think you're supposed to blush and say 'You... You've got to be kidding me! Who would want anything to do with this loser?!" and then begin bashing up Aki-kun... or something like that?"

"Ah, that's so Sawamura-san."

"Mmhmm, that's exactly what the golden-haired half-blood loser would say."

"Why is everyone targeting me?!"

I can't explain why, but Katou's conclusion was a beautiful one.

CHAPTER 1 – IF YOU REACH THE CLIMAX AT THE START, IT’LL BE EVEN WORSE AT THE END

“...”

“...”

It was a spacious floor littered with bookcases, filled with the muted sound of rustling paper.

“...”

“...”

An overwhelming number of shelves, every one large and intimidating.

Each one crammed, not with light novels or comics, but plain and solemn book bindings.

“...”

“...Erm, Utaha-senpai...”

“Yes, Ethics-kun? I wish you would keep your talking to a minimum while I’m reading.”

“Oh, yes. About that.”

Tired of the oppressive atmosphere, I finally spoke to the absorbed bookworm for the first time in an hour.

“Utaha-senpai, how long are you planning to stay here?”

“Hmm, I suppose we can leave as soon as I finish all 68 volumes of 「Ryotaro Shiba’s Complete Literary Collection.」”¹⁰

“...That’s a joke, right, Senpai?”

“...Fine. At least let me finish the first volume.”

“I wish you wouldn’t make these types of half-believable jokes, Senpai!”

I uncharacteristically lost my temper as I realized how Utaha-senpai had led me completely by the nose.

“Hmm, I do think I can finish if I try my best though. It’d be so much easier if they didn’t insist on closing at eleven.”

“Senpai, you do realize that this is a bookstore, not a library, right?”

Ah, Utaha-senpai.

She had rushed in as soon as the doors opened and spent the better part of two hours in the literature section on the third floor of Ikebukuro’s JU*KUDO¹¹ reading — but not buying — a single book.

In that span of time I had managed to browse all the available book titles several times, explore all the other floors, and grab breakfast at the café — all in an effort to waste time as I waited for that girl to come back to earth.

It was too much to ask for. I gave up. I had used every ounce of patience I could muster.

“But if that were the case, then I don’t think they would paste ‘Use me and read!’ on all the chairs, Ethics-kun.”

These large bookstore chains must hold themselves to some really high service standards to be willing victims of this monster of a customer.

“...You should at least take a break once in a while, Senpai. It’s almost lunchtime.”

“Sigh. I guess you leave me no choice but to purchase this book, Ethics-kun.”

“And I wish you had just done that from the start, Senpai.”

¹⁰ Ryotaro Shiba (1923-1996), historical author.

¹¹ JUNKUDO bookstore, opening hours: Monday – Saturday 1000-2300, Sunday and Public Holidays 1000-2200.

And so began a Saturday in the middle of autumn.

We had planned to spend the day strolling around the district... But so far, we hadn't managed to explore more than one place.

"Come on, Ethics-kun. Let's go."

"Argh, hold on a minute!"

"Tsk. You're the one who insisted on paying and doing the heavy lifting, but you've already failed at both, Ethics-kun."

"Well, I wasn't expecting you to go for five *really* heavy and *really* expensive hardcover books right off the bat."

"Whose fault is it that I'm always too busy to read?"

We were here on a da- I mean, shopping trip because I told Utaha-senpai that she could have anything she wanted after completing the scenario yesterday.

"Well, I couldn't buy you the entire *Literary Collection*, but I can at least treat you to lunch. Within my means as a high-schooler of course."

"Sure, and I'll also let you pamper me with that high-schooler's stamina of yours too."

"We're strictly talking about carrying things, right?!"

As you can see, she's an author who thrives on ambiguity.

* * *

"I'm sorry for making you wait, Eriri."

"You're late, Megumi!"

"Well, I was still in my pajamas half an hour ago when I suddenly received a message to come to JU*KUDO, so think I already did my best."

"Well, I don't care! And because you were *five* minutes late, they've already left!"

"They?"

"I can't believe it! It was that Kasumigaoka Utaha and-"

"Ah, I get it. Say no more."

"...Why do I get the feeling that you're hiding something from me?"

"That's just your imagination. Where did the two of them end up going?"

"Why you think I called you here?"

"I think you just roped me into something really troublesome, right, Eriri?"

* * *

We eventually ate lunch at an Italian restaurant crowded with couples, male- and female-only groups and even entire families.

I'm pretty sure their main selling point must have been being at the cutting edge of providing something for anyone and everyone.

"Thanks for the meal, Ethics-kun."

"It was nothing."

"Oh, no need to be so humble, Ethics-kun. That was extremely satisfying. The potatoes were especially delectable, if I might add."

"Thanks for being so understanding, Senpai. Honestly, it'd be a bit troublesome if we didn't come to this pizza place..."

"You're surprisingly image-conscious, Ethics-kun."

"Well I have to be, or I'll go bankrupt!"

And so, the thirty minutes at Sha**y's¹² a complete loss, we once again returned to the streets of Ikebukuro.

"Well, I can't help it, Ethics-kun. More so than food or sex, I thirst for *knowledge*."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that middle part."

What irked Utaha-senpai was not my choice of restaurant or even the quality of the food, but the fact that we had even stopped for lunch at all.

When the pizza I ordered finally came, she signaled that she didn't want to get her hands dirty without even glancing at me.

¹² Shakey's Pizza, a block away from the station.

Then, in complete defiance of all the commotion in the restaurant, she proceeded to flip open the book we had just bought and was once again immersed in it in no time at all.

And finally, with extraordinary tactlessness, she ate only the wedges on the side with, of all things, a pair of chopsticks.

"...So, Senpai, where to next?"

"Hmm, I don't mind as long as it's a place that's not too cold and quiet enough for me to read in peace."

"You know, Senpai, I'm getting real sick of you treating me like I don't exist!"

I'm going to die if I let this continue.

While I think I've done my best to satisfy Utaha-senpai's unreasonable demands thus far, apparently it's still not enough to compete against the power of Shiba-sensei's pen.

"What about catching a movie then, Senpai?"

"A... movie?"

And thus I regained a bit of initiative by directing us both to Cinema ***shine.¹³

Staying true to its reputation for variety, the cinema's walls were crammed with posters advertising not only the latest triple-A Hollywood blockbusters, but also movies which might appeal to otaku as well.

If there was a place that might simultaneously satisfy Utaha-senpai's rabid curiosity and allow us both to have a good time, this is it.

"Hmm... I guess this place will do."

After giving all the posters a brief glance, Senpai gave a cryptic validation of my intuition.

"So it's decided then! What movie shall we watch? Allow me to recommend the most recent-

"I was thinking about something more along the lines of a disaster movie with adequate amounts of screaming and gore... Surely they have one of those here?"

"...That's just sick, Senpai."

I'm a bit worried about the nature of this 'curiosity' Senpai's trying to satisfy.

* * *

"..."

"...Nothing here."

"But we searched everywhere within a 200-meter radius!"

"There're thousands of people in this area..."

"Yeah... But Tomoya shouldn't be *this* difficult to find..."

"Hmm? Why's that?"

"Well, he has kind of an...otaku aura?"

"He still stands out way less than you though."

"...Shut up."

"Anyway, I forgot to ask earlier, but how'd you find them in the first place? And in Ikebukuro of all places?"

"H...Huh? Oh, err, it was pure coincidence. Really."

"Oh, I see. Say, the last time we met at Rokutenba Mall was pure coincidence too, right?"¹⁴

"I really hate sharp girls like you."

"Eh?"

"Wh...What! It's a coincidence if I say it is, alright!?"

"Isn't that Aki-kun and Kasumigaoka-senpai over there?"

"What? Where? Where?"

"At the entrance of the cinema, see? About ten people back in the queue..."

"Oh! I see them. Wow, you're pretty good, Megumi. I like how you always sneak into position while tricking your enemies into dropping their guard."

"I wish you wouldn't describe me like that, Eriri."

* * *

"While the animation and delivery were passable, what struck me most were the egregious redundancies in the plot."

¹⁴ See Volume 2 (or Episode 5 of the anime adaptation).

¹³ Cinema Sunshine in Sunshine City.

"Oh, really? I thought the new character was really cute though."

"That's merely the result of adequate character design. She was there only to briefly set up the backstory — a throw-in who unwittingly undid the reputation of the far superior TV adaptation."

"Don't you think that last scene was pretty epic?"

"And *that's* because of production. It was a shoddy attempt to mask the banality of the ending by employing almost *vulgar* quantities of special effects and musical accompaniment."

"Why can't we just focus on the great characters and production instead of pointing out all the flaws in the script?"

"Because undiscerning viewers like you corrupt producers."

"I'm just a mindless cash cow, after all."

"And also my director, Ethics-kun."

"...Oh, right."

It was already past four by the time 「Snow Prism –the movie—」 ended, and it was at an outlet of Tsubaki** Coffee¹⁵ that the two of us found ourselves in deep discussion. It had taken considerable effort to find a table amongst the weekend crowd.

Despite Senpai's considerable desire to watch a real-life disaster movie, I somehow managed to drag her into watching one I had been wanting to catch for some time.

I should have been more prepared for the caustic inquisition that came after, though.

"You must have the acuity and courage to criticize, Ethics-kun."

"...Courage?"

"Even if it comes to my work."

"You won't be angry if I do?"

"Of course not. Should anything be more important than pleasing our users?"

"I... guess not?"

¹⁵ Tsubakiya Coffee. Coffee: A beverage second only to Dr Pepper, the intellectual drink for the chosen ones.

"Oh, I'll sulk about it of course. But I won't say anything to you for a month. In fact, if what you say doesn't make any sense, I might not say anything to you ever again."

"On second thought, I don't think I'll take you up on your offer, Utaha-senpai!"

At least now it feels like we're on a proper da- I mean, shopping trip.

We haven't had a single proper conversation all day, instead being something closer to the smartphone-toting socially-awkward younger generation the media loves ranting about.

"I would think things should have settled down over there by now. Let's go."

I was just thinking about how nicely the day was finally going when Utaha-senpai stood up and headed for the register.

"Ah, Senpai! Leave the bill to—"

"Oh, no need to keep up appearances, Ethics-kun. Coming here wasn't part of your plan, was it?"

"...Sorry."

Indeed, I had originally planned to have tea at Café de CR*E, St**bucks or Dou**r Coffee¹⁶ after the movie.

I guess Senpai noticed me freezing up when it was time to order.

But what's with coffee at a 1000 yen a cup anyway? That's more expensive than lunch!

"I guess we're just in different tax brackets, Ethics-kun."

But having said that, Utaha-senpai was clearly not yet prepared to bring our rendezvous to an end. As she spoke to me, I noticed her expression was not too different from the one she had on when absorbed in her book earlier.

While I was reassured by Senpai's unusually pleasant mood, my mind returned to something she said that I had overlooked earlier.

"I would think things should have settled down over there by now..."

Where exactly was 'over there'?

* * *

"Waaaaaaah..."

¹⁶ Cafe de CRIE, Starbucks and Doutor Coffee respectively.

"Are you alright?"

"...Yeah... I... I think so. Sorry, I just couldn't help myself."

"Oh, it's okay, Eriri. I was just thinking about how you're really sensitive to these kinds of things."

"I... I never thought they'd actually do Mariko's end..."

"Oh, so you can look at it that way too."

"Doesn't it just feel so right that he chose to forget Ui and move on? Now he only has Mariko, who's been by his side all this time!"

"I... guess?"

"I'm so glad I didn't give up hope after the TV series ended..."

"That's nice, Eriri, but what about Aki-kun and Kasumigaoka-senpai? I think they left some time ago..."

"But 「Snow Prism」, Megumi! 「Snow Prism」!"

"Sigh. Yes, Eriri, I love childhood friends too."

* * *

"Thanks for accompanying me today, Ethics-kun."

"It was my pleasure... Uhhhhhhhhhhh."

"You look tired, Ethics-kun."

"That last round was the finishing blow."

The time was seven in the evening, the place an ethnic food restaurant in Su*sh*ne City.

With the Sky Lounge obviously beyond my means, we settled for a place in the more affordable Shopping Street to end off our da- I mean, shopping trip.

"Wow. Today was nothing but literature and otaku culture."

"Today was all about satisfying my curiosity. Pictorial or prosaic, it matters not to me so long as it's interesting."

Which of course meant another round of spending right after we left the café earlier.

At To**noara, anim*te, Ga**rs¹⁷ or basically any shop in Ikebukuro selling otaku merchandise, regardless of whether it was for women or for men, whether it was doujin or commercial, anything new that Utaha-senpai saw (don't forget she'd been isolated from the real world for a few months) she bought and passed into my waiting arms.

I know I promised Senpai that she could have anything she wanted, but this is approaching Comiket-levels of heavy.

"Couldn't you have gotten this stuff off A**zon?"¹⁸

"Well I can't live like Sawamura-san, Ethics-kun. I can't get used to the idea of purchasing something without being able to physically see it – it's just my parsimonious character."

"Haha, very funny."

But in truth, that's pretty admirable coming from a high schooler turned extremely successful author.

...Then again, I don't think Eriri's a very good comparison.

"But really, I want to thank you once again for writing up the scenarios, Utaha-senpai."

"Oh, it was my pleasure. I'm sorry it took so long."

"I definitely appreciate your sentiment, Utaha-senpai. But if anybody, you should be apologizing to Machida-san, not me."

Tardiness isn't too much of a problem for doujin projects, but it's totally different for commercial ventures, where there's real money involved. Kasumi Utako's in-charge at Fushikawa Books always has that smile on her face, but it should be noted that she's also a ravenous consumer of energy drinks, gastric pills and cup noodles.

But she's already set aside enough of a buffer and piled the pressure on her client early, so I guess that makes us even.

"But I can't help but think of all the trouble I've created for all of you down the road. Especially you, Ethics-kun."

"Oh, don't worry about me, Utaha-senpai. I'm itching for the challenge."

She's absolutely right about creating trouble, though.

¹⁷ Comics Toranoana (Tiger's Den), animate, Gamers.

¹⁸ A South American forest and river share this name. No prizes for guessing.

Senpai said she had completed everything save the epilogue at last month's status report, but that part ended up taking more than two weeks. The additional text comprised about 4 kilobytes worth of information... or the equivalent of less than ten pages of writing.

I guess creators just don't measure success by the amount of time they spend on something. Like business ventures or... stuff.

"Either way, I think my obligations to this project have been fulfilled."

"Mmhmm. You've really-

"With the novel and all, I don't think I'll be showing up much at circle meetings anymore."

"Oh."

The tone in my voice dropped so quickly it was almost funny.

"I haven't given my future serious thought yet, but I guess it's better late than never."

"...Oh."

...I didn't think I was capable of changing my facial expressions that quickly.

"Hmm, I think I've done well enough to get to where I want to go."

"*Oh no*, it's not like people would kill for your results, Utaha-senpai!"

Now I was letting my anxiety get the better of me.

"Doumei University still has a lot of open slots, and my admissions counselor said I couldn't go wrong if I chose to go there."

"Doumei... Isn't that in Kansai?"

It felt like cold water was being poured on me.

"Then there's also Souou. It's much closer to home, so I'm in a bit of a dilemma right now."

"..."

There was no longer any doubt in my mind.

"What's wrong, Ethics-kun? You're sweating a lot for wintertime."

I was being made fun of.

"Which does Ethics-kun think is better?"

"Erm, well..."

"Doumei's literary faculty ranks higher."

"O...Oh. Is that so?"

"But then again it'll be a pain moving away from my family..."

"Mmm."

"But I can't say the concept of living independently doesn't appeal to me..."

"Yeah..."

While I've been turning red and blue, inhaling and exhaling, glancing downwards and upwards in reflection of the violent fluctuations in my mood, Utaha-senpai has been resting her head on her hand with her eyes staring at me the entire time.

"What's the matter, hmm?"

I could tell from her expression that she was clearly enjoying my discomfort.

* * *

"What about this? I think it'll look good on you, Erii."

"Umm..."

"...Then again, I guess anything looks good on you."

"Hey..."

"You're slender with fair skin and sparkly hair... Sigh. Erii, aren't you going to try this one too?"

"Stop! Just hold it right there!"

"Oh, you like the one you're wearing now?"

"No! Megumi!"

"Yes?"

"What are we doing in P**CO?!"¹⁹

¹⁹ PARCO, and

"Oh, would ***bu²⁰ be better?"

"My god, no, that's not the point! I mean, what are we doing in a place like this?!"

"We're here to buy casual clothes for you, right? You can't wear that tracksuit all the time."

"But the two of them are getting away!"

"I think that's kind of your fault..."

"Aaaaah, but there's no use crying over spilt milk, right? A-Anyway, we should start looking for them right away!."

"Haven't we done enough for today? I'm a bit worried about whether this stalking is even legal in the first place."

"What are you talking about? Who knows what kind of things the two of them might do together if we leave them alone? They might undermine the very existence of our circle!"

"But nothing really happened, right? Not today anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Kasumigaoka-senpai just texted me a while ago to say that everything is going according to plan."

"...Come again?"

* * *

"Erm, Utaha-senpai."

"Hmm?"

It was now half-past seven. In other words, it had taken me half an hour to fully recover from the shock I received earlier.

"Now, this is only my opinion."

"Of course. I'll still be the one making the decision in the end."

At this point, I could finally meet the eyes of Utaha-senpai — who hadn't moved an inch — but the inside of my head was still spinning as I carefully pondered upon what to say.

Even if I decide to pass this off as just my personal opinion or advice, it's still something that will greatly affect her future no matter how I look at it. I have to pick my words carefully.

It's because she's someone important to me.

Man, this is heavy.

"I think... Souou would be a better choice."

"I see."

Her expression and tone still hadn't changed.

"But Senpai, I really think you should ask somebody else. Like, I'm still just a kid and you'd obviously prefer a more mature opinion—"

"Tell me why you think Souou is better."

"Well, it's nearby and you know, we can still work together on our game after you've graduated..."

Her facial features were still frozen in place.

"University students have a lot of free time, right? Especially if you're taking liberal arts or literature..."

But she hadn't said a single word.

"And it's not like you'll have to look for employment. You can probably retire after just another four years of writing novels..."

Senpai continued watching, taking in everything I said with that same poker face.

"...But I won't force you to work with me anymore if you don't want to."

She must have seen through me by now.

"This will be the last game we make this year, but it may also be the last we ever make together."

And that was the unadulterated truth.

But as her junior, her circle member, her fellow creator, her *believer*...

"But I refuse to consider that possibility."

Of the many emotions swirling in my chest, that was how I chose to convey the one I wanted to the most.

I noticed Utaha-senpai was now staring directly into my eyes.

²⁰ Seibu.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Senpai casually laid an arm out on the table and proceeded to lay her head delicately onto it. Those same sleepy eyes still looked up into mine.

"I was not expecting to be wooed so openly, Ethics-kun."

"That wasn't my intention!"

There she goes twisting my words again.

But I guess this time she's closer to the truth than most.

"While unnecessarily circuitous and meandering, I have to say it was a good effort overall. I believe some form of reward is in order."

"Why, thank you, Senpai."

On that note, Utaha-senpai's musings ended.

She never did tell me what she thought about my 'opinion' – not that it was completely unexpected.

Kasumi Utako's characters never say what they truly mean either.

"And so, here is your gift – though it might also turn out to be a punishment depending on how you use it," Utaha-senpai said as reached into an unseen pocket, producing something and placing it on the table.

"What's this?"

Upon closer inspection, the object revealed itself to be a plain and unadorned flash drive.

"An alternate version of the *True* route, entirely different from the original."

"What?!"

Forget plain, I was looking at an artfully disguised bomb!

"For our game, there exists... *another possibility*."

"S...Senpai?"

"It must be you who decides, Ethics-kun – which to affirm, which to deliver."

Utaha-senpai's expression was totally unreadable.

"Which will you choose?"



CHAPTER 2 – THE AUTHOR NEVER EXPECTED THE STORY TO BE SO CHAOTIC, SO YOU CAN'T BLAME HIM FOR BEING SAD

"Hmm, that's strange. Aki-kun *did* tell us to be here at ten, right?"

"S-Surely he's at home and not drinking morning coffee in a hotel room somewhere?"

"Erm, Eriri, I know creators have to be creative, but it'll be troublesome if you start applying it to your delusions."

"R-Right, Megumi, but I still think I should check Tomoya's room. Just to be on the safe side, you know?"

"Wouldn't it be bad if he isn't in?"

"I'll just see if he's there or not. And besides, *he's* the one who'll be in trouble if he isn't. Then things will get really bad really soon."

"Hmm... I guess you have a point. I'll go get the key."

"O- Wait, how do you know where the key is? Don't tell me you've been coming here in the middle of the night without-"

"Eriri, what I did say about managing your creativity?"

* * *

"Waaaaaaaah..."

"..."

"Erm..."

So began a Sunday in the middle of autumn.

Or more specifically, the day after yesterday (the events in the first chapter).

"Ooooh, ah, it's *sniff* you guys *sniff*"

"Do you want to greet us or cry?"

"Erm, good morning, Aki-kun. It looks like you didn't sleep much."

My eyes, bloodshot after an entire night of crying, were still glued to the monitor of my PC when Eriri and Katou walked through the door.

"Oooh *sniff*, sorry *sniff*. It's meeting time already? *sniff* My bad, *sniff* I didn't hear the bell."

Drowning in a sea of text, it was as if I had lost all sense of time and sound.

"Tomoya, what the hell are you doing?!"

"S-Sorry, but *sniff* I was just moved to tears."

"What? So you *were* doing *it* at the Prince²¹ last night!"

"Wow, you even narrowed it down to the place."

"It's not that, it's just... Look, it'll be better if you read it yourselves."

I directed the two of them to the seemingly dull and uninteresting wall of text on screen, and they obliged, despite the looks of doubt on their faces.

Anything to do with the Prince was quickly forgotten.

* * *

"Oh my god..."

"Wow..."

Half an hour passed, and both of them looked very much like idiots as they stared at me with their mouths open... A reaction not unlike mine when I first finished reading the file.

"Amazing, right? It's the missionary of tragic love; it's the artist of heartrending destruction; it's Kasumi Utako with a dash of Utaha-senpai added in..."

²¹ Sunshine City Prince Hotel, 3-1-5 Higashi-IKEBUKURO, Toshima-ku, IKEBUKURO, Tokyo, Japan 170-8440

"She's completely changed the original ending!"

"Can't you just appreciate the obvious difference in quality?"

"I can appreciate all the illustrations I'll have to redo now!"

As a direct result of the sudden appearance of Utaha-senpai's new scenario, Eriri, whose workload in the remaining month before the deadline had unexpectedly and exponentially increased, now cradled her head painfully in her hands.

...I don't understand why she can't look past the small things and see this masterpiece for what it really is.

"Wow, this is pretty interesting... I thought the original was good enough, but this is even better."

"Katou?"

But maybe, our main heroine, distant from all these petty concerns — unaware of what "she" was getting into — can.

"They're just words but... I can see images and hear music! And the ending really gave me goosebumps."

"I know, right? I'm so happy you understand, Katou! That's what I expect from a Jane Doe."

"I don't think any girl would be pleased to hear that, Aki-kun."

...While she may take issue with my compliments, we certainly have no trouble agreeing on the quality of Utaha-senpai's second attempt.

It's so good it'll bring you to tears every time.

"Utaha-senpai really only changed the last part, but the final product reads like a completely different story altogether."

"I see... That's also pretty amazing!"

There were indeed a lot of modifications, but virtually all were confined to the latter half of the penultimate chapter and epilogue — which made the disparities between the old and new renditions all the more astonishing.

Taken together with Senpai's ingenious 'reconciliation' of the plot by subtly shifting the perspective of the story, we get a beautiful end effect that leaves an indelible impression.

Allow me to elaborate.

While the plot development's style is considerably unorthodox, every conceptual seed sowed from the introduction onward is skillfully reaped by the conclusion — just as in the previous iteration.

But this time, it's taken to another level. My inadequate powers of expression may not carry the full essence of what I mean to say, so let me use an analogy.

Let's assume our heroine first says something to the effect of 'I know you'll be able to do it, Seiji-kun,' in the prologue.

We then arrive at the eventual climax of the story. While in the original ending, the same heroine might say to Seiji the same line as they struggle to fight and survive together, in the newer version, the line would be a hollow echo in the background as our protagonist slowly loses consciousness after making the ultimate sacrifice.

And despite the added subtlety, it still succeeds in preserving both the wholesomeness and appeal of the original scenario.

With these kinds of gems found everywhere in the new plot, I'm beginning to have nefarious thoughts of selling the initial product as is then the second as some kind of 'director's cut'.

It's almost as if you're playing two separate games in one... But I guess that would be a bit *too* crazy.

"But Tomoya, are you sure you're alright with this?"

"Eriri?"

While my expression exuded an almost-religious tranquility — well, I was actually grinning devilishly — Eriri, slightly more calm, bitter, and contrite than before, called out to me.

"I know Megumi also agrees, but this means that everything we've done until now is now open for reinterpretation. The entire *theme* of our game might have changed."

"Mmm."

"That of course includes the art too. Forget the epilogue, we're gonna have to redo everything right from the beginning."

"...I see."

"And I shouldn't have to tell you, but more important than all of this, the heroine for the *True* route has changed."

"I understand."

Maybe Utaha-senpai had done *too* good of a job.

"Really? Meguri still looks like the main heroine to me..."

"...It's as Katou says."

"Yep, Megumi's right about that."

"Eh?"

These were the two new realities created by Utaha-senpai.

The main heroine and *true* heroine were no longer the same.

To the casual character-focused player, the main heroine Meguri remains central to the game experience.

But to a person accustomed to analyzing and studying galge on a regular basis such as Eri and myself, the true essence of the game is now embodied by the secondary heroine, Ruri.

"Ahhhh, this sense of loss, this sense of pure agony accompanied by a strange feeling of exhilaration – everything has the smell of *Metronome in Love* on it..."

"It's pretty clear that you're a Kasumi Utako fanboy, Aki-kun."

"Wow, she really got me. At the rate things are going, it's soon going to become Kasumi Utako's game while Kashiwagi Eri fades into the background..."

"You've been careless, Eri."

"Hmph. Well, I never meant to be."

I could always point out that Kashiwagi Eri's best works are all R-rated, but as they say, some things are better left unsaid.

And besides, it would be remiss of me to be so facetious when Eri is finally complimenting Utaha-senpai's work from the perspective of a fellow creator, despite always finding ways to criticize it before.

"Right. So before we begin work proper, I think a formal vote is in order?"

As I said those words with utmost seriousness, the room took on an air of palpable anxiety.

Do we take the easy way out and stick with the adequately entertaining original?

Or do we choose the less-travelled path that may reward us with a far more compelling end product?

A challenging ordeal awaits us no matter which route we embrace, but so does the promise of a truly extraordinary game.

Still, we must decide.

There is no turning back once we do.

This single decision will determine our fate, for better or for worse.

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but I'm afraid we're not going to do that."

"Huh?"

"I don't have the time for something this heavy, troublesome and calorie-consuming now that I've got a deadline to meet. Get some self-awareness, Mr. Producer."

"B-But we've always talked things over before deciding things as a group, haven't we?"

"Not this time, we won't. This time, it's *your* job as our director to decide, and our job to shut up and listen."

"My... job?"

Do I really have to do this on my own?

"If you really wanted another opinion, it would be from the scenario writer... Only she isn't here, is she?"

"W-Well that's because she's already finished her part... And things on her novel-writing side are getting a bit behind schedule..."

"...But I see that doesn't stop her from getting cozy with *some* men for the entire day."

"Don't say that like you saw it with your own eyes!"

She didn't... She couldn't have, right?

"Anyway, it doesn't change the fact that Kasumigaoka Utaha isn't here. So somebody better take responsibility, '*Ethics-kun*'."

"Ooh..."

To be honest, Eri's not being irresponsible by forcing this decision onto me.

She understands the gravity of the outcome and the responsibility that comes with it.

So I'll have to respect her decision too.

There's no route I can choose which will allow me to come out unscathed.

And of course by 'route' I mean the direction our circle will head.

There aren't really any other choices I have to make, right?²²

* * *

"Hey Aki-kun, would it be alright if I downloaded this big file?"

"So long as it isn't anything that will destroy societal order."

"Oh no worries, it's from a site you already bookmarked."

"What's with that yandere thoroughness, Megumi?!"

It had been a few hours since the two of them arrived at my house and were in the midst of taking a break after lunch.

Katou's last sentence prompted an immediate reaction from Eriri, who was fiddling with her tablet on the table at the other side of the room.

Standing in the middle of it all, I answered Katou's question subconsciously, my eyes focused on two different sets of paper I held in each hand.

As you'd have probably guessed, they were Utaha-senpai's two versions of the scenario.

"Hmm..."

"Hmm... How do I go about installing this?"

"There'll be a readme inside after you unzip the folder."

"Wow, you're right! Thanks, Aki-kun."

"Hmm... Hmm..."

Abandoned—I mean, entrusted with making the final call on the scenario, I had been mumbling to myself for more than an hour.

"All right, the installation looks complete. Now how do I—"

"Double click on the file with .exe behind the title."

"Ooh, it's the title screen! Thanks, Aki-kun."

"Hmm... Hmm... Hmm..."

²² A pun on route, which can also be interpreted as the girl Tomoya should choose. The answer to that question is Katou, obviously.

But while I've been desperately scratching my head for answers, I haven't been able to get any serious thinking, analyzing or deciding done because of minor distractions like Katou's sporadic murmuring.

It's not Katou's fault though – it's mine that she's free enough to play games in the first place.

If I can't decide where to take our circle, the scripting can't go anywhere either. If the scripting can't go anywhere, then Katou's going to continue to act like a restless hamster and I'll keep saying stupid things like these and my thinking will get nowhere...

"Hmm... Hmm... Hmm... HMM—"

"Shut up, Tomoya!"

"B-But Katou talked way more than I did!"

"I'm fine as long she speaks normally instead of making stupid sounds like you!"

"Ooh, I totally get what you mean! I can sleep with the TV on just fine, but one mosquito is enough to ruin my entire night."

"I know, right? I hate it when people snore. It gets on my nerves no matter how soft it is."

"So now you know why you need to shut up?"

"...Ok."

...And I'll create the sort of vicious cycle that gets others (Eriri) irritated.

So consciously reminding myself to stay silent, I took three deep breaths and dove back into the text – into the soundproof world I had dwelled in since the middle of the previous night and past the break of today's dawn.

Hmm... Hmm... Hmm... Hmm... Hmm...

But no matter how much I read and reread, deciding on one or the other is as futile as trying to stop myself from making those meaningless noises in my head even when my mouth is shut.

When I read the first before the second, the latter seems to have more impact, but reverse the order and I'll feel exactly the same about the original.

I cannot help but conclude that both are extraordinarily captivating and persuasive, and equally so.

"Oh, by the way, Aki-kun, don't you notice something different about Eriri today?"

"M-Megumi!"

What criteria should I base my decision on?

If it's moe, I'll have to pick the first.

If it's about drawing out an emotional response from the audience, I'll have to go with the second.

If it's in terms of overall balance, then the former would be the right choice.

If it's all about the *True* route, then it's definitely the latter.

"Eriri always comes over in her tracksuit, but for some reason today she's decided on getting an upgrade..."

"L-Like I said Megumi, you promised me you wouldn't say anything about that today!"

Compared to the alternative, the original version feels shallow.

It's appealing, but nothing is surprising about the plot development, which makes it engaging for the majority of players, but also kind of bland.

Then again, when I read the first after the second, it's impossible to deny that the latter's pretty amazing in its intricacy, but it just doesn't fit in with our original concept of a game that draws its strength from the charm of its main heroine.

Like Eriri said, the second scenario is Kasumi Utako's brainchild – the type of game only connoisseurs will be able to appreciate.

"But considering we spent so much effort picking it out yesterday, aren't you at least curious about what Aki-kun thinks about your dress?"

"W-W-Why would I be interested in the opinion of a 2D otaku? A-And besides, it's all *your* fault for choosing such a plain one-piece dress, Megumi!"

"Ehhh, that's strange... I sort of remember you asking me not to choose something very outstanding..."

I'm a Kasumi Utako fanboy. An 「A Metronome in Love」 fanboy.

But is Kasumi Utako really the person we need to carry this game?

"Aki-kun?"

"..."

I found myself experiencing the same feelings that I had not so long ago.

I don't want a 'moe-less' Katou – a boring heroine.

What I want is the character Kashiwagi Eri created – cute, gorgeous, a little risqué and immensely appealing.

Then cue Kasumi Utako's pen – adversity that can only make her more precious and more deserving of your love. You'll wish you could reach into your screen and protect her from harm.

Only by marrying 「blessing software」 's veritable powers will we achieve a main heroine with the perfect combination of moe, dere, melancholy, joy...

"Nnnnnnnnnnyaaaahhhh!"

"...Hmm?"

"What's happening? What's happening?"

I was so perplexed by the two sets of paper in my hands I didn't see the golden blur of centrifugal force before it was too late.

I haven't experienced the twintail vortex in quite a while.

* * *

"So I'm not allowed to disturb your work, but you're allowed to interrupt mine?"

"...Shut up."

Having finally collected all the paper strewn around the room, I turned to face Eriri, who had a...weird expression on her face while she avoided my gaze.

"So, what's wrong?"

"...Nothing's wrong."

"You wanted something, right? Tell me."

"You... didn't hear anything I said just now?"

"Wasn't that because a *certain* somebody wanted me to think *really* hard about this scenario thing?"

"Ooh..."

"I'm really sorry, but we'll have to start from the beginning. So, what is it?"

"Hmm... Hmm... Hmm..."

"Ok, now you're really making me angry."

"M-Megumi..."

With her wrath from before gone without a trace, Eriri withered despondently and glanced repeatedly to the side, where somebody sat rooted to the PC.

"Hmm? Oh, sorry Eriri, but I'm in the middle of something."

Katou was evidently absorbed in the trial she had downloaded earlier, playing with a desperation you could sense by the way she rhythmically clicked the mouse.

I noticed that while the two of them must have been in animated conversation only just a while ago, Katou's latest answer was as flat as the computer screen.

I'm not sure if I should be annoyed or impressed by her 'talent' for atmosphere-reading.

"A-Ah, well, in other words, to put it simply, in conclusion—"

"...In conclusion?"

"Ooh..."

Cut off from aid, Eriri all but wilted over.

I can't figure out what it is she can't say that has her forming beads of cold sweat on her forehead, her eyes forever looking downward, and her hands trembling while grabbing not her usual tracksuit but the hem of her *skirt*...

Wait, what?

"Hey, I just realized but—"

"What? What?"

"You and Katou have gotten pretty close recently, huh? Like how you're calling each other by your first names..."

".....We've been doing that for almost a month now."

Ah, the trembling stopped.

"Really? But that's great! I still remember how your first meeting didn't go very well..."

"And whose fault was that?"

"Don't you think it's great that Katou's leveled up from 「Classmate B」 to 「Eriri's Friend A」 now?"

"That's more of a downgrade if anything."

Well, jokes aside, it seems that I've managed to steer the conversation to an area which Eriri is much more comfortable with.

All those hours playing galge were not spent in vain.

"Anyway, I'm sure you and Katou will— Huh?"

"What is it *now*?"

"You're wearing normal clothes like Katou today!"

"A delayed reaction?!"

I'd completely missed it before, but today Eriri was wearing a one-piece dress with three-quarter sleeves revealing her shoulders.

It's not something you'd expect from a rich heiress... But then, it's not something a hikikomori would wear either.

It's been eight years since I'd last seen her wear a skirt in my room.



"A-Aaah... I-It's, err, something Megumi and I picked up from P**CO yesterday..."

"Oh, that's pretty rare. I've only ever seen you wear our school's uniform or something tailor-made."

"W-Well, even / have to go out and get clothes every once in a while..."

"I don't think you'd have the fashion sense to pull that off if Katou wasn't there though."

"I- Wait, I look *good*?!"

"Like a normal 3D bishoujo, yeah."

"A normal 3D b-b-bi—"

"Eriri?"

"That's, I... Ah..."

As I was wondering why Eriri seemed to have suddenly lost the ability to form complete sentences...

"Woah! Come look at this, you two!"

"Katou?"

...Katou demonstrated an equally dismal aptitude for grasping the situation as she suddenly cut in.

"M-Megumi, you interrupt at the worst possible times!"

"Sorry, but isn't this Izumi-chan's work?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

But the initial shock of that revelation lasted only as long as it took for Katou to say her next line.

"This trial is the work of Hashima Izumi-chan... Without a doubt," Katou said as she gestured towards the display – a CG of a kimono-clad girl dancing, but with a certain illusionary flavor.

Whether it was the design or color arrangement, the beauty or cuteness of the character, everything exuded a certain aura far beyond what you'd expect from doujin art.

But it wasn't the art I found myself looking at.

"Izumi-chan... But why?"

Because ensconced in fine print at the bottom right corner of this specimen of doujin art was an emblem of the corporate world – 「©rouge en rouge」 .

CHAPTER 3 – AND SO, THE DYNAMIC DUO IS UNLEASHED. THIS IS NOT A JOKE.

"It's been a while, Tomoya-kun... and Kashiwagi Eri-sensei."

Several hours later.

"So, what's up?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Iori."

While it couldn't have been later than five in the evening, our surroundings were already shrouded in the November twilight.

We were looking forward to having the pleasure of that summer's brief encounter...

"Why are you here instead of Izumi-chan?!"

...Only to be thoroughly disappointed.

The place we had arranged to meet was a small park fairly near my house, right next to the Shimamura Middle School which I had once attended.

It was also the same place where I had reunited with my underclassman after three years.

"Why, I'm confused. If I recall, it was *you* who arranged this meeting?"

"Yes, but there's no reason I'd want to meet *you*, Iori! What have you done with Izumi-chan?"

"But... You sent an email to my circle's address?"

"I believe I was pretty clear when I wrote 「To Hashima Izumi-sama」!"

"All correspondence passes through the eyes of our site admins first."

"What?! Then what about fan mail addressed to the creators? Isn't it the job of a circle representative to faithfully deliver spam, scam emails and letters from stalkers along with the 8000 yen you charge for a piece of game art to the illustrators you depend on? What the hell happened to your pride?!"

"That's good enough, Tomoya."

"But... You're right, Eriri. I've said more than enough."

Hashima lori just regarded us arrogantly with an ironic smile on his face.

He's a former classmate of mine, a representative of the 「rouge en rouge」 circle, and a proper doujin racketeer.

He's taller, more suave and maybe just a little more handsome than I am.

Whether it's his fluffy hair or the mole beneath his eye, every part of his body oozes a certain deviousness you'd never associate with a stereotypical otaku-type like myself.

Unfortunately, he also happens to be Izumi-chan's elder brother.

Three months ago...

A chance encounter with an underclassman who had returned from Nagoya after moving there three years earlier.

Hashima Izumi.

Three years my junior, she became an otaku under my personal influence.

She's since pursued her hobby, and become a meticulous doujin creator.

I was fortunate enough to chance upon her work during Summer Comiket, and was thoroughly surprised, awed, and moved by her then undisclosed talent.

Realizing what a waste it would be for such a masterpiece to go unnoticed, I audaciously canvassed it to the surrounding crowd.

Unfortunately, on the back of the fun and bittersweetness we shared that day is a tale of shady transactions only a handful of people know of.

Her brother lori, also back from Nagoya, making adept use of his personal connections and ambitious nature, soon had the mega-shutter circle 「rouge en rouge」 in the palm of his hand.

Also in his sights: Kashiwagi Eri, who, if she accepted, would have been the headline illustrator for 「rouge en rouge」's inaugural game.

It's as if they're headed on a deliberate collision course with us at 「blessing software」, even though we're inferior to them in almost every way.

"Anyway, from what I read in the email, it seems that you've already played the trial version of the game we're planning to release at Winter Comiket. Allow me to thank you for your support, Tomoya-kun."

"lori..."

At least I can take comfort in the small setback lori's plans should have suffered from Eriri's rejection.

"The response we're getting is greater than anything I could have imagined... We're periodically trending and have already surpassed ten thousand downloads, so I'd say we've made a pretty good start."

But the threat only seems to loom larger as Winter Comiket approaches.

Especially since he's now installed his own sister as his latest sacrifice - the headline illustrator for their project.

"Though I can't say I'm not worried about the popularity of the romantic adventure genre nowadays... Will the appeal of tragedy, passion and moe continue to survive the test of time?"

「The Everlasting and Ephemeral Evangel」

Toyed by the same unfortunate fate, doomed forever to reincarnate and to love each other again.

The story of a couple's love, struggles, life and death through endless union and separation.

That's the game lori is producing.

"Just what is your point?"

"Didn't I tell you last summer? This is our competition."

"Well, I don't think you could have made it any more obvious!"

"It is?"

"Don't play dumb with me, lori! It's pretty clear you have a reasonable amount of information about the content of the game we're making!"

"Well, it's not like you bothered to hide it or anything, Tomoya-kun. All I did was eavesdrop a little at Summer Comiket."

"Tch."

Iori's not fooling anybody by passing off the numerous similarities between the two games, the genre and literary style to name a few, as pure coincidence.

He's issued us a direct challenge.

"I-I retract my earlier statement a hundred- N-No, seven trillion steps."²³

"Sigh... Always with the otaku way of talking, Tomoya-kun."

I wasn't referring to Iori's nefarious plots though.

Not the ends Iori's trying to achieve, but the means by which he's trying to achieve them.

"Keep Izumi-chan out of this, Iori."

It's only the beginning, but her extraordinary talent can only bode well for her future.

"Surely you can see the tremendous amount of potential she has! If only you would give her a bit more time and freed- ouch!"

I could've sworn it felt like someone just stubbed a toe into the back of my calf.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Tomoya?"

"No, I just..."

The only possible suspect of the crime had her head turned towards the side, and made little attempt at concealing her complicity.

You could at least *try*, you know.

"That's funny, because *I* seem to recall *somebody* saying that he didn't want to have anything to do with Izumi-chan not so long ago."

Regaining my composure in an instant, I once again turned to regard Iori with a reproachful gaze.

"And *I* used to think *Izumi-chan* was the one thing exempt from your dark, twisted ambitions."

Despite all that has happened between us, that was the one line I still believed my former friend would never cross.

It should be pretty obvious by now that Iori is the kind of person who would use any underhanded means, wherewithal, and connections he has at his disposal to further his personal prestige, fame, or business card. But if anything, the people whom he dealt with then weren't much better.

I still believed...that no matter how many female cosplayer also-rans, budding voice actresses and sketch artists he devoured... You know what, I'm done defending this guy!

"My, it sounds as if you're making *me* the villain here, Tomoya."

"If you've got the time to make these kinds of jokes, then you'd better explain yourself while you still can, Iori!"

He's despicable.

"I mean, it's not like *I* had to make a game with the same genre as yours. But if the staff say we *have* to, then you know..."

"What, the writers?"

"Actually, it was our head illustrator."

"What?!"

"Yes, you wouldn't believe all the trouble she caused. Even *I* had trouble finding a capable romance writer in such a short time... In the end, I was forced to poach somebody from one of our rival circles."

"Y-You've got to be kidding me!"

"You know I have no qualms about saying the most sordid things, Tomoya, but I never lie."

"Oh, then what about to *Izumi-chan*, huh?!"

"I'm telling the truth! It was Izumi-chan *herself* who said she wanted to fight all of you on equal terms."

"Why on earth would she say *that*?"

"Because if I didn't, then I wouldn't be able to compete with Sawamura-senpai..."

"...Huh?"

It took me a while to realize that last answer had come not from Iori's mouth, but from *behind*.

²³ Catchphrase from romance VN *Cherry Petals Fall Like Teardrops*.

Covered by the trees, in the thicket.

* * *

"Izumi...chan?"

The form sprouting from within the shade of the thicket slowly revealed itself to be the unmistakable figure of a human – Hashima Izumi-chan.

While noticeably restrained, the high pitched voice and distinctive lisp were univocally hers.

And despite her diminutive stature, there was one area she was certainly not lacking in.

Another prominent force in the doujin illustration scene had made her appearance.

Our circle's illustrator is certainly at a disadvantage.²⁴

...Then again, it's not the right time to dwell on *these* harsh realities.

"It's nice to see you again, Senpai..."

Everything about her has taken a 180 degree turn since last summer, starting with her appearance.

In complete contrast with the sweet, simple and cheerful clothing she wore during Summer Comiket...
No, it's as if her persona itself had a total makeover.

Frilly and lacy, a dull yet gaudy outfit now hugged her body, while similarly flashy ribbons and shoes tied her hair and adorned her feet.

It would be hard to mistake her for anything but a gothic lolita.

The obligatory 「Senpai!」 accompanied by her ecstatic footsteps as she rushed over had also disappeared, now replaced by a graceful stride and an emotionless countenance.

It was as if two Izumis existed; the cheerful girl during the day, and the demon who manifests and possesses her when night falls.²⁵



²⁴ For those slow on the uptake, a reference to boob size.

²⁵ Omagatoki in the original text, referring to the moment at dusk when the sky turns dark, and also the time when "dark creatures" are supposed to appear.

...Phew, I almost got caught up in the grim atmosphere.

"Yeah, it's been a really long time, Izumi-chan! How have you been? I'm sorry we couldn't keep in touch after Summer Comiket, but we've been pretty busy on our side too, haha..."

"Oh, please don't blame yourself, Senpai! I'm at fault too."

"Ahahahaha. So, have you gotten used to life back here? Made some friends?"

"Oh, you jest, Senpai. I lived all my life here until three years ago, so it's not like I've completely forgotten my way around."

"I guess that's true! Hahahaha."

"Hahahaha- Oh, I mean, excuse me, Senpai!"

It was only for an instant, but I think I caught a glimpse of the *real* Izumi-chan there.

"What I wanted to say, Senpai, is that I'm no longer the Hashima Izumi you know."

As Izumi-chan reverted to her colder and more impersonal persona, I thought I could detect a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"Izumi-chan, why did you hide yourself earlier? I feel really bad about leaving you out of the conversation just now."

"Oh, there's no way I'd be mad at Senpai for ignoring me! It's just that Onii-chan... said the lead should always take a backseat first before making her grand entrance."

"Lead? Who?"

"Was this all part of your plan, lori?!"

Ignoring Eriri's sarcastic whisper, I continued to glare at lori, who had since floated across to where Izumi-chan was standing.

"I was but faithfully reprising my role as the evil character. I thought you, of all people, would be able to appreciate my performance, Tomoya-kun."

"Tsk."

An unexpected entrance. Clad in black from head to toe. A voice as soft as a light breeze.

It's the classic "evil character returns" scene, like in the middle of the third season when you recognize the seemingly mysterious character as soon you hear his voice.

It's like those villains they keep bringing back over and over again... Only in our case they only seem to get stronger.

"Izumi-chan, you've been tricked!"

"Senpai..."

But that won't stop me from continuing to fight back the sinister yet attractive kind of evil lori embodies.

"Remember how it all began? Wasn't it because of all those works that you loved?"

This can't be the Izumi-chan that I know.

"When was it ever about gaining fame or making money? What happened to all the friendships you made playing *LitRhap*??"²⁶

She's a brilliant doujin creator who turned me into a believer after I read only one book, and I can't bear to see her go down the road she's headed.

"Don't you remember, Izumi-chan? All those people smiling after they saw your work?"

I'm shouting myself hoarse trying to reach the bottom of Izumi's heart.

The one that was so pure only three months ago.

It was not to be.

"I'm deeply sorry, Senpai, but..."

"Ah..."

Add "sly" next to sinister and attractive too.

"Onii-chan prepared today's arrangements and clothing... But everything I've thought about and puzzled over – everything I've decided up to this point has been of my own free will."

"Izumi-chan..."

The evil mastermind hasn't resorted to any puppeteering or brainwashing, but simply convinced the good guy to see his point of view.

"Like I said, Senpai... I'm not the Izumi-chan Senpai knows – Senpai's kouhai anymore."

"That's too many senpais in one sentence."

²⁶ Little Love Rhapsody, nonexistent otome game for the PSP.

"I'm not the Hashima Izumi you love... I mean, *loved*, anymore."

"The way she conveniently mixes in unnecessary words is *really* starting to get on my nerves."

"Goodbye, Senpai... The summer that I spent selling books with you, I will always hold dear in my heart."

"Izumi-chaaaaan!"

I know I looked really cool and I definitely wasn't crying, but for some reason tears were running down my cheeks.

"You lose, Tomoya! A-ha-ha-ha-ha! A-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

And Iori, completely caught up in the moment and basking in the glory of his success, even though there really wasn't anything to celebrate about, made me lose track of what kind of character he was trying to be anymore.

"Well, you all seem to be having a lot of fun."

At this point I was finding Eriri to be more of a nuisance than of any assistance.

"So, Sawamura-senpai- no I mean, *Kashiwagi Eri*, we can finally have our battle now."

"Hmpf."

The Dark Izumi-chan who had so far managed to keep in character, now directed all her animosity onto the person standing by my side.

Accepting it all nonchalantly, the golden-haired twintail who had thus far been content with playing a minor role and opening her mouth only to make unhelpful wisecracks, finally chose to reveal her true form as she stepped in front of me and began slowly swinging those tails.

It hurts when those tails find your eyes.

"I suppose I should first congratulate you on becoming 「rouge on rouge」 's main illustrator. That's pretty admirable considering you've only been around for a couple of months."

With her Spencer heiress mode activated, Eriri was more than a match for Dark Izumi.

"But I'd reckon most of it was the result of your brother's machinations."

"..."

"Eriri?!"

What?! What's going on?! When did things between the two of them get this bad?

Didn't Eriri apologize to Izumi after Summer Comiket? And didn't she also give her a make-up present?²⁷

Most importantly, aren't they both mega *LitRhap* fans?²⁸

"I trust you won't be holding back for Winter Comiket, Kashiwagi-san."

"Oh, you can count on it."

"I'm grateful for your understanding."

"My rival's from 「rouge en rouge」 . If I don't pull out all the stops, it's pretty obvious who's gonna win."

"...Circles don't have anything to do with this."

"Oh, don't worry, that's not enough of a handicap to stop me."

"...D-Don't you dare underestimate me! You have no idea how hard I've worked since then!"

"Well, I'll certainly be looking forward to it, 「rouge en rouge」 's Izumi-chan. In the meantime, try not to get crushed by the signboard, okay?"

"Grr...!"

Huh? Huhhhhhh?

And is it just me, or does Eriri seem to be the villain here?

"N-Now, wait just a minute, Eriri-"

"What, can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"I don't know... But for some reason, it's seems to me like *you're* the one who's been itching to pick a fight."

"She started it."

"But we apologized during the summer, right?"

"Well... I lied."

"Ehhhhhhhh?!"

Wow, I really didn't need to hear that.

²⁷ See Epilogue, Volume 3, or episode 9 of the anime adaptation.

²⁸ That's precisely the problem, Tomoya.

What about the relief I felt when I thought a load had finally been taken off my chest? \\
Women are scary.

"It's all right. I can understand where Sawamura-senpai is coming from."

"I-Izumi-chan?"

While I was taken aback by Eriri's sudden and unnatural change of character, I was even more surprised by how indifferent Izumi-chan was to Eriri's betrayal.

"I mean, if a nameless creator without any achievements came out of nowhere to overtake me, I'd be pretty mad too."

"Why you little-"

"Hiiiiiiii-!?"

Women are scary. Catfights are scary.

I noticed that lori had chosen to turn away and cover his ears with his hands some time ago.

Even he can't do much about this situation.

* * *

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"...Err... I think we can head back now, Eriri."

"...Err... Why don't we go home, Izumi?"

It had been several minutes since the verbal skirmish ended and lapsed into a cold war.

Having finally regained some semblance of control, the two non-combatants simultaneously decided to call for a retreat.

"...Whatever."

"Mmm, let's go home, Onii-chan."

Perhaps even *they* thought they had gone a little overboard, and there was a bit of awkwardness as the two finally separated.

"Ah, err, I guess that's that, lori."

"Ah, aah, let's both do our best for Winter Comiket, Tomoya-kun."

It's almost funny how we're now sending each other off fairly pleasantly in a show of good sportsmanship when we were the ones who were at such loggerheads earlier.

"lori."

"Yes, Tomoya-kun?"

"No matter what methods you may use, 「blessing software」 will never lose to the likes of you."

And so keeping with the spirit of sincerity, I thought it was only right for me to issue one last formal declaration of war.

"Oh, you're pretty confident, aren't you?"

"Making games is a multifaceted skill, lori."

While it's easy to focus on the looming gory- I mean, passionate head-to-head duel between the two illustrators, we weren't going to reach our shared goal relying on their strengths alone.

What you need is beautiful art, complementary music, and the programming to sync it all together – as well as one more trump card 「rouge en rouge」 will never have.

"I'm sure you already know, but-"

"Kasumi Utako? Yeah, I guess she's pretty good for the subject matter you've chosen."

"It doesn't matter what subject it is. On the scenario front, we've got you-"

"Oh, I'm not planning on losing on that end either."

"...Huh?"

It took me awhile to process what lori just said.

It seemed to me like he just breezily discounted the author of a light novel selling over 500,000 copies.

"Come on, there's no way you could have found another doujin writer of Kasumi Utako's caliber."

"Of course. But I never said anything about writing a better story."

"Then what-

"Didn't you say it yourself, Tomoya-kun? That '*making a game was a multifaceted skill*'?"

"...Iori?"

Iori didn't seem like he was saying that out of spite or because he was trying to be pretentious.

I knew that from my former position as his closest confidant.

But that in turn begs the question of why he's so sure of himself.

"This time then, Tomoya-kun... Good night."

"O-Oi..."

But Iori only abruptly terminated the conversation, leaving me with an acute sense of confusion as he turned, taking Izumi-chan with him towards the park gate.

"Tomoya-senpai... I'm sorry."

It was half an apology and half a display of determination, and thus Izumi-chan too, without having reconciled with us in the end, gave only a quick nod of her head as she left us standing there.

"Eriri... Let's go."

"Tomoya..."

I didn't have it in me to hold the both of them back any longer, so I left with Eriri in the other direction.

* * *

"Oh, Izumi-chan's leaving already?"

"...Eh?"

And then...

"I'll be looking forward to seeing your game at Winter Comiket, Izumi-chan! Work hard, okay?"

"Eh...?"

A girl sitting on a bench next to us called out cozily to Izumi-chan in the distance.

A girl who had left my house together with us, walked to the park together with us, and had been idling by our side for quite some time...

"Ahhhhh, I'm sorry Megumi-san! I can't believe I didn't see you this entire time!"

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Weren't you just lecturing me earlier about hiding people away, Tomoya-kun?"

"Well I never intended to! Why would I do that anyway?!"

"You could have at least said *something*, Megumi. I'm sorry, but you really have no presence whatsoever."

"Ooh, my bad. I'm currently at the climax of the game, you see... Are we leaving?"

I wonder when it was that we started thinking that Katou had already left.

CHAPTER 4 – ONLY THE MOST DEVOUT BELIEVERS CAN BECOME TRUE ANTIS

"Hmm..."

The classroom was abuzz with activity during lunchtime.

It was five days after that Sunday evening we spent at the park.

Come to think of it, isn't this the first classroom scene we've had in this school-based slice-of-life light novel series?

"Hmmm..."

I put those nonsensical thoughts of unclear origin aside, along with the idle chatter besieging me from the groups blooming like a field of flowers around the surrounding tables, and diligently continued my established habit of reading text alone.

Not just any kind of text though.

"You're still reading that?"

"Mmhmm."

Specifically, text on tattered printer paper.

"I got you the usual. A curry bun and black coffee."

"Thanks. I'm all out of small change, so put it on my tab."

"Oh, does that mean I've leveled up from Classmate B to Aki-kun's Minion A now?"

"...I'm sorry, okay? I'll pay! I'll even throw in a bit of interest, so forgive me, Katou!"

Katou, as per her M.O. lately, ignored the words I had to say after some serious soul-searching prompted by my indifferent treatment of her and sat in the seat in front of me, tearing open the packaging containing her own bread.

That being said, there's also something weird about the way people have been treating the both of us recently.

We never used to attract any significant attention eating together like this. Anybody who had business usually wouldn't hesitate to barge in, but it seems that getting through lunch without any interruption is lately becoming the norm.

I guess this means that the people around us are beginning to acknowledge our relationship as master and servant.. Even though I had clearly denied it not too long ago.

"So, did you figure out anything?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You guess what?"

"Utaha-senpai's scenario is really good."

"You know, I'm getting this really strong feeling of *déjà vu*. I feel like at this point I'm supposed to say 'Yes, yes, Devotee No.2', or something like that?"

"...I guess you are, but maybe you forgot that part where the listener gets really irritated after he hears that?"

So continued the days of me reading and rereading Utaha-senpai's two scenarios over and over and over and over again.

As a result of reading them since last Sunday, the size of my eyes had been reduced to the thickness of plates.

"I'm not planning on losing on that end either."

Iori's whisper, genuine and unpretentious, echoed repeatedly in my head – on the way to school in the morning, during the lunch break we're having now, during circle activities, on the way home, and even when I'm writing the game script at home at night.

...And even while I'm in class, though I never told you that.

As soon as I find a bit of time, I'm going to find out what he actually meant.

"Aren't you overthinking this just a little? I think they're both pretty good."

"The question of how well your opinion on the game can be trusted aside, yeah, I think I'm overthinking this too."

"And in turn, I'll set aside *my* opinion about the arrogance of otaku and ask you why you don't-"

"I know... But I can't help it."

"Sigh... Hmm?"

I know I'm thinking about this too much.

But no matter how many times I read and reread, the greatness of each of Utaha-senpai's scenarios never seems to diminish.

The entertainment value of the first, the storytelling of the second – both are equally compelling.

But anyway, how can lori be so sure of himself?

How can he think he's already won when we haven't even released a trial version?

How can he so simply discount the awesomeness of our scenario?

This *has* to be the product of lori's overconfidence and loose tongue, or an attempt to trick me into a psychological war with myself, or-

"Oh..."

But it can't be.

I know for sure lori that wasn't lying or making any empty boasts then.

It's funny that I should be the first to trust him over this, but I have no choice but to follow my instincts.

That same sincerity doesn't apply to his attitude towards invention though.

He's the kind of trash that will- *can* only judge the value of things creators produce with their own blood and sweat by the price they fetch and nothing else.

But if lori's so confident about winning, it then means that the game he's making is almost certain to be successful, at least commercially.

I've had to learn that the hard way too many times before.

"Say Katou, I think- What the?!"

Putting all those thoughts together in my head, I finally noticed that Katou had disappeared from her seat.

...Look, I'm not treating her badly on purpose again, okay? It's not my fault that her stealth ratings are so high.

* * *

"Kasumigaoka-senpai?"

"Huh?!"

"What's the matter? Is it so strange that I should make an appearance at this second years' classroom?"

"K-Katou-san..."

"Should we call Aki-kun?"

"No, that won't be necessary... No need to trouble Ethics-kun."

"Yes, that would cause quite a stir. I don't really care about Aki-kun's reputation, but I'm worried about yours, Kasumigaoka-senpai."

"...I don't really care about what others have to say about me."

"Anyway, I haven't seen you around a lot at circle meetings recently, Senpai. The new novel's really keeping you busy, hmm?"

"A-ah, yeah, but, you know, I'm also... not sure how to describe it... Like I'm letting it ferment, or maybe I'm afraid to start or I'm stuck in a blue funk or..."

"I think I'm supposed to respond with 'Huh? What was that?' here like a hard-of-hearing main character, right?"

"...You've come under some really bad influences, haven't you?"

"Do you want to ask about that or about Aki-kun?"

"Ah, well, actually..."

"Yes?"

"How's Ethics-kun doing?"

"Are you sure you want to ask me and not him?"

"...Is that bad?"

"Hmm, well, I guess it's alright. He's been reading your scenarios a lot."

"...I don't remember them being that long."

"He seems to be having trouble deciding."

"...Deciding?"

"On which to use."

"So... What has he concluded?"

"Nothing, which is why he's still reading your scenarios over and over again."

"So... Can I take that to mean there's still hope?"

"Hmm? What was that? I really couldn't hear what you said this time."

"Oh, it's nothing you could do anything about. Or rather, it's nothing that would mean anything to *you*."

"Does that mean I'm being discounted or identified as a threat?"

"...Whatever."

* * *

"Hmm..."

With the passing of time, class had somehow ended, and I found myself on the way back home from school.

In lieu of Utaha-senpai's completion of the scenario, and Eriri preparing to enter the illustration slaughterhouse, the usual weekend circle activities had been suspended as of this week.

"Hmmm..."

Because of that, the evening sun was higher than usual in the sky as Katou and I strolled towards the station.

Despite several hours going by, I had gotten no closer to making a decision on the two scenarios.

Something *else* had changed though.

"Hmmmm..."

"Stop stealing my role, Katou!"

"Ah, I'm sorry, Aki-kun."

The person who now held the papers embossed with text muttering to herself was no longer myself, but Katou.

"Katou, what's up? Why the sudden motivation?"

"I don't think I was ever unmotivated to begin with."

"I know, but..."

Katou made it back to class right before lunch break ended and stole the scenarios away from me before reading them through the rest of the afternoon.

I don't think that qualifies as something that she would have done 'to begin with.'

"Say, Aki-kun."

"Yes?"

"What's the hidden meaning behind Kasumigaoka-senpai's second scenario?"

Leaving my many doubts intact, Katou recklessly pushed the attack.

Handing the printouts of the original scenario she had just finished back to me, Katou immediately directed her attention to those of the second.

"Hidden... meaning?"

"What does it *actually* mean to choose one of the two?"

"I..."

Aren't we just going to choose the more interesting one and sell it?

Wait, no, I can't just simplify it like that.

Only after I spend an untold amount of time reading and rereading both scenarios can I decide which is more compelling, which to accept, which to sell... Which I haven't decided yet... But only then will I be able to do them justice.

"More than anything, Tomoya-kun, which one do you prefer?"

It's escalated to the point where I'm not just deciding between the two anymore.

The pride the first takes in the perfect cuteness of the ponytailed Meguri and its extraordinary wholesomeness as a romance game.

The pride the second takes in the tear-jerking affection of the long-banged Ruri, working its edge as a compelling and deep love story.

But no matter how much I compare the two texts, I can only seem to either tremble with excitement or find my eyes brimming with tears.

"In the end... We may never be able to decide without actually playing the game."

Man, I have to stop making these kinds of excuses for myself.

"That's it, Aki-kun!"

"What? What's it?"

At least Katou's not going to let me run away anymore.

Or... Is she?

The light gleaming in Katou's eyes weren't the evil sort, like the kind you'd have if you were about to catch a cornered rat. It was one of pure elation, like when you finally found the path forward you had been searching for.

Either way, her character's unusually noticeable today.

"If we can't decide without actually playing the game, then isn't that exactly what we should do?"

"Yeah, but the game still hasn't- Wait, you mean-"

"Mmhmm."

"You mean we should sell it while it's still incomplete?!"

"Ah..."

I felt chills run up my spine as Katou made her terrifying suggestion.

"That kind of thinking is *dangerous*, Katou!"

Betraying the users and succumbing to the temptation of money – those are the forbidden fruit creators like us must never taste.

You may be able to get away with your ill-gotten gains once, but your subsequent works will never be able to escape the death sentence of a vile reputation.

"That's not what I'm saying, Aki-kun. What I'm saying is-"

"So you still insist on carrying out your plan to fake an accidental overwriting of the master copy with the trial version to the bitter end?!"

"Erm... Maybe you'd like to take a breather, Aki-kun?"

Hey, people have really done that before, you know?

* * *

"A test play?"

"Mmhmm. We won't have to worry about it being incomplete."

What Katou is suggesting was completely different from what I'd originally assumed... Which I realize should have been pretty apparent now that I've had a chance to calmly think it over.

"Hmm... Well, it's true that the scenarios, at least, are in order."

It does make some sense to pause and combine all the raw materials we have now before adding in the remaining parts at a later date.

"It sounds naïve, but there might be something we can't understand just by reading..."

"Hmm..."

What Katou's suggesting is more than plausible.

Pictures, music, production... Combining these, we'll get the intangible sensations of a complete game that reading the scenario alone simply can't reproduce.

Only by *making the games* can we decide which game will be more compelling, which game to accept, which game to sell – and it may very well be the only way to affirm which game matches our taste more closely.

"Mmhmm, it's exactly as you say, Katou."

"So that means..."

Making a game is a multifaceted skill...

I was acting so arrogant when I said that, but I might have been the one who believed in those words the least.

"Let's make a game."

Man, I'm not even sure what's going on anymore.

I always take great pleasure in preaching my principles, but I always forget them when they seem to matter the most – only to be reminded of them by the same girl over and over again.

"Hey Katou... Thanks."

What the hell, Katou...

"Aki-kun, I know you're trying to trigger a moe event, but it'll hurt you know?"

"I think you'd better clarify whether you're talking about physical pain or my conduct, Katou!"²⁹

And so, in the flow of things, I somehow found myself tugging Katou's ponytail, causing her to respond with a mercilessly deadpan attack.

* * *

"W-Well then, I guess I'll start work immediately..."

The train had since arrived at the stop before Katou's.

Having somewhat shaken off the embarrassment of my actions earlier, I mustered all the courage I could and finally spoke to her.

Still, this must be the most nervous I've ever been talking to her.

"How long will it take before it's playable?"

"Hmm, let's see... I think I'll have it ready by next weekend."

"That's pretty late."

"It can't be helped. I still have to script everything from the beginning to the end, you know."

"But won't Eriri's work have to be put on hold during that time?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Throw in this added work — which may not seem so sensible from an efficiency standpoint while our hands are already full finishing the master copy — and clashes in scheduling will surely become unavoidable.

"Ooh, that's not good... To be wasting so much time."

"Well in the meantime, starting tonight, we'll ask Eriri to start on the event CGs for one of the scenarios while we work on the script."

"But won't that push back the schedule even further?"

"...We'll work something out."

"Aki-kun..."

A sleepless hell probably awaits me this week.

But it's only the ludicrous price Katou's suggestion entails.

It's a price I'm more than willing to pay for our dream.

"Say, Aki-kun..."

"Hmm?"

The train slowed as the platform of Katou's station came into view.

"It'll take one week if you work on the script *alone*, right?"

Katou mused, looking down in thought with an expression more serious than usual.

"That's... Well..."

"I'm only speculating here, but considering how you'll be working alone at home... Does that estimation include the time you'll be spending on various... *distractions*?"

"...Such as?"

The tone of her voice matched the expression on her face.

"Such as surfing the web... or watching anime... or rereading old manga for a change of pace only to somehow end up finishing *the entire collection*..."

²⁹ One of those things that don't translate very well into English. Katou (maybe unintentionally but I doubt it) makes a pun on the word 痛い, which can translate to "physical hurting", or the lesser known connotation of "indecency".

"Tell me where you hid your surveillance cameras in my room, or else!"

She's exaggerating... Well, just a bit.

"You're sure you won't slack off?"

"I-I wouldn't dream of it."

"You swear?"

"Erm..."

The TV line-up from Saturday night to Sunday morning is whirling around the back of my mind.

That's eight anime episodes, two specials, variety shows...

"..."

"..."

While I was in the depths of agonizing over all these concerns, the train doors had already opened.

"..."

"...Err, umm, I think I swear. Probably."

But as buzzers sounded across the platform, a determined female voice squeezed out above all the noise.

"Aki-kun, take this!"

"Huh?"

Katou thrust her bag at me.



"Take it, I'm going to rush home and get changed before I come over. See you."

"Ah, Katou! Hey!"

It was already too late when I called out again, as the doors closed and the figure of Katou flying up the stairs with her empty hands swinging at maximum speed disappeared out of sight.

Having witnessed such uncharacteristically quick work and lightning speed materialize completely out of nowhere, I could only stare blankly like an idiot at the bag that I now held in my hands as the train accelerated on.

...Somehow I got the feeling that if our school uniform had a necktie, she would have used that to pull me off the train³⁰.

* * *

"The third chapter's done, Aki-kun."

"Good, should we fire it up then?"

As the hours wore on, Friday evening gave way to Friday night.

"Hmm, wouldn't it be better if we switch out some of the sample music or the standing poses of the characters?"

"Nope, we shouldn't concern ourselves too much with production yet. Our priority right now is inserting the text to make it look like a game."

True to her word, Katou had arrived without making much of a scene, carrying a travel bag containing two days' worth of clothes. She had immediately started up the PC and began expertly tinkering with the script without taking so much as a break until now.

"...Oh, it crashed."

"Well, it was a rushed job. We'll try again after debugging it."

"Okay."

After a short troubleshooting meeting, we each turned back to the screens of our individual PCs and stroked the keys.

³⁰ A reference to Touma pulling Haruki off the subway in Episode 4 of the White Album 2 anime adaptation, scenario writer a certain Maruto Fumiaki.

Now that I think about it, today's the first time *Katou*'s initiating conversation, and consistently so, even though it's just the two of us in a dramatic sleepover event.

But it can't be helped, I suppose. Today of all days, I can't afford to waste any time on idle chatter, anime, games, or unspeakable things we certainly can't write about in this light novel.

We've given ourselves the objective of finishing our part of the game by *this* weekend.

By moving the target forward by a week, we've guaranteed a pretty murderous schedule ahead for ourselves.

"Ah, I think I've found the problem. The file for the background here is missing."

"We'll just plug in a dummy file for now. We have to make sure the entire thing works first."

"Got it."

"We're only facing these problems because of the shortfall in material. Only pay attention to the text, especially the parts with choice branches."

"I know. Thankfully the game doesn't really have any complicated ones."

"I don't understand why you'd be thankful for that though."

"Well, I think I'm done fixing it, Aki-kun."

"Right, then let's run it again."

Oh, by the way, I forgot to mention earlier that my parents are in today, so it's not like the both of us are alone in the house.

I couldn't tell you about what they think is happening up here though.

"Oh, it crashed again."

"Oh, Katou..."

* * *

"Uaaah..."

"Should we call it a day?"

As Katou yawned sleepily and I looked at the clock, I saw that it was now past 5 am on Saturday morning.

The sky beyond the curtains was still pitch black, but it would be brighter in the matter of an hour.

"It's alright. We haven't made enough progress yet."

"It isn't wise to continue recklessly at the expense of efficiency when you're tired. I think we've done a lot already, so you should take a nap and recharge."

Katou clearly isn't used to pulling all-nighters, so it's going to get even tougher for her here on out.

"No, I'm fine. I bought a bottle of black coffee just in case."

"Black coffee won't help as much as you think, you know. If it's caffeine you want, I'd recommend mocha tablets."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, the amount of caffeine in one tablet's about the same as you'd get in three to four cups of coffee, and if you take a sheet of ten tablets you won't have to worry about sleeping for at least three days."

Note: Please use responsibly.

"Wow, that's pretty amazing. But isn't consuming ten tablets at once a bit much? Won't there be any side effects?"

"Nope. It's just that you may start experiencing rapid heart palpitations... cough uncontrollably like you have a cold but don't... feel like throwing up... and then, after those three nights of staying up you'll lapse into a coma for the next three days."

"I think I'll just stick with coffee."

Note: Results may vary.

* * *

"..."

"..."

"Go to sleep, Katou."

"No, I can still..."

It was half past three in the afternoon.

About time for the weekend sun to begin its journey west across the sky.

With provisions consisting of only a single bottle of coffee and Ca**rieM*te³¹, the tireless Katou was no longer fighting mere sleepiness, but overpowering lethargy.

"The work doesn't seem to end..."

"Well, we knew what we were getting into."

It probably doesn't help that things aren't progressing as well as she'd expected either.

Katou doesn't have much experience in working through the night, nor is she used to dealing with the frustration it brings.

The frustration of being stuck in first gear.

There's a limit to what our bodies can do.

"I guess it was pretty ridiculous trying to finish this in two days..."

"Hmm, maybe."

It's been almost twenty hours since we started work – almost half the time we've allotted to ourselves.

But as for overall progress, we're closer to thirty percent.

"Are we just going in circles, completely wasting our time?"

"Well, even if we can't meet the target, we'll still have less to do further down the road."

"Yeah, but we're doing something that may be totally meaningless in the end, right?"

Katou isn't wrong, but our effort in amassing all our materials won't be in vain, at least.

By forcing ourselves to make a game to assess the scenario, we're actually saving a few days' worth of work in the future.

"Sorry, Aki-kun. I got all excited yesterday, but now I'm the one dragging us down..."

Those sorrowful words leaked out from Katou one after the other, as the goal she had set for herself evaporated.

But...

"No, this isn't meaningless. We're not wasting our time."

³¹ CalorieMate. This isn't the first time this MRE (ew, gross) is making an appearance.

"Eh?"

"I still believe in what you said, Katou."

Strangely enough, I was still wide awake when I said those words with quiet belief and self-confidence.

Play the game and understand.

"But why?"

"Because otherwise, the 'paper drama'³² genre wouldn't exist."

How can we stop now that we've already started running with it? It'll be such a bother to.

"You need not only a completed scenario, but visuals, sound, and above all, programming to reel the user into a story."

She's the one who dragged me into this, but now she's dropping out? That's such a waste.

"Tastefully incorporate all elements without allowing any to stand out, and before you realize it, the user will find himself fully immersed in the scenario. *That's* traditional paper drama, something you won't find in a lot of other otaku media."

"Aki-kun..."

"Like you said, there's another world out there that we'll never be able to experience unless we do this. That world is the reason why this genre still exists."

"..."

That's why I believe.

In the realities, truths, and emotions that can only be found in games.

I believe.

In the confidence Lori has in 「rouge en rouge」's current superiority.

If that doujin racketeering prodigy says so, then there has to be something fishy going on.

Something important that we're missing.

³² Kamishibai (紙芝居), literally 'paper drama'. A form of storytelling using picture scrolls or illustrated boards inserted into a stage, withdrawn one by one as the story progresses. Analogous to puppet shows in Western context.

"Look, Katou..."

"..."

Katou didn't respond immediately.

Instead, she stood up slowly, shuffled unsteadily into a corner of the room and collapsed.

"Katou?"

She lay face down into the bed.

"I'm sorry, Aki-kun. Wake me up in two hours."

"Ehh..."

At that crucial juncture, Katou ran out of gas.

And in the time it took me to think that, she was already fast asleep.

* * *

"Zzz..."

"Zzz..."

"Hey."

"Nn... Nn..."

"Nnn... Zzz..."

"Oi, Tomo."

"Zzz..."

"*sniff* Zzz..."

"I said, WAKE UP!"

"Huh?"

"AHHHHHHHHHH!"

Following the incredible noise which I was sure burst my eardrums, I was assaulted by the familiar feeling of a chokehold around my head in the reenactment of an old drama.

"So you've finally decided to show your true colors, huh?! I knew it! I always knew that your 2D otaku characterization was just a front, you lying womanizer!"

Equally traumatizing were those two soft and springy articles simultaneously assaulting my back.

"Ah, Ah, Ah, Mit-chan! I give in! I give in!"

The identity of my attacker should be pretty obvious by now.

"Hmm... Oh, Hyoudou-san?"

Looks like Michiru had dutifully kept to her principles of unannounced marauding.

"Tch, I was wondering who it was, Katou-san. What's the meaning of this? How long has it been since the two of started doing... *this*?"

"We've been doing it since... last night? We came directly after school so..."

...I wish those two would get on the same page before talking.

* * *

As I looked at my watch, I realized that it was already seven in the evening.

We had exceeded our designated two-hour sleeping time by an additional one-and-a-half.

"Oh, a game-making sleepover, I see."

As Michiru quickly grasped the situation, I noticed that she had sometime liberated her usual place on my bed from Katou, and was in sitting in her regular cross-legged position.

I also forgot to add (rather sarcastically) that I preferred the diffident Tomo of the past³³.

Wait, I guess it's not self-confidence we're talking about here, but *dignity*.

"So, did we make it?"

"Well, we're in a pretty rough spot right now."

"Yeah, I see both of you have been sleeping quite a bit."

"Katou slept first, okay?"

³³ See Epilogue, Volume 4.

"Yeah, I was wrong to trust Aki-kun to wake me up. Sorry."

"...Good of you to know."

At least Katou has returned to her usual deadpan self after sleeping a little.

"Mm, I see... Ah, that's not so good... You've really done it this time, huh..."

Listening to our exchange, Michiru sporadically delivered some halfhearted comments as she strummed her guitar.

The melody that came out reminded me more of the desultory ramblings of a ukulele.

I don't think she can show her disinterest any more conspicuously.

"But you really saved us, Michiru."

"I know, right? You two would have probably slept till next morning if I hadn't come."

Oh, but I wouldn't be so haughty if I were you, Michiru.

Because although unintentional, now I've gotten enough rest.

"Right now I could mistake you for an original character a third-rate fanfic author would put into a lot of his short stories."

"...I'm sorry, but you lost me there."

"In other words, you're a hero with the power to single-handedly wreck the balance of the world!"

How do I convey the urgency of the situation and my ad-libs to her? I thought as a recalculation of epic proportions raged in my head.

"Ah, what I mean is now that you're here, we can turn this hopeless game around and make a huge comeback!"

"E-Eh? But you know I'm only good for playing guitars and making songs right? I don't think I'll really be able to help with whatever it is you're doing..."

"No, that's fine. You'll have your own part to play."

An image was slowly forming in my head.

A vision of something more substantial than the hard work Katou and I had already in.

"That's right. You're going to be our *negotiator*."

"Your nego... what?"

"What it means is that you're going to be engaging in some discussion... With those three otaku girls in your band!"

"H-Huh? Why would they have anything to do with this?!"

Ignoring that adverse reflex action, my thoughts shifted in turn to each of the other members of 「icy tail」, that anisong rock band Michiru belongs to.

If I remember correctly, Echika had some experience in programming.

She took pride in doing (only) anything computer-related well in class.

Toki and Ranko³⁴ are probably gamers.

Making an inventory of material, beta-testing... There's always more work to be done.

"Yes, let's do it! I'm sure each of them will be a million or so times more useful than you!"

"That's it, I'm going home!"

"That's right, go home, Michiru! Go and get their help! Go and see if your house is a good place to work! If it isn't, then get them over here! Tell them if they won't come, then I won't be their manager either!"

"You're always doing this to me, Tomo!"

"Ah, in the meantime I think I'll go take a bath."³⁵

* * *

The rest of the day was even more of a bloodbath.

But with the speedy arrival of Toki, Echika and Ranko, we made dramatic progress.

Most notably, Echika's skill was as good as we hoped, which made me wish that I'd made her a circle member right from the start.

...Apparently she had a date arranged, so I'm not sure if she was working so prolifically out of despair or spite.

Exceeding ourselves, our efforts finally came to fruition at the very end.

Five minutes before Sunday turned to Monday, the α version of our game was complete.

Then...

* * *

"I see..."

My room, in the afterglow of the party after everyone had left.

The morning after a weekend that had passed like a storm.

"Now I see, Iori..."

I stayed up until I was going to be late.

The crystal of our dreams, now complete; I expressed my feelings about it as succinctly and appropriately as I could.

"What the hell... It's just a shitty game!"

³⁴ In order of appearance: Mizuhara Echika, bassist. Himekawa Tokino, rhythm guitar. Morioka Ranko, drums. deadpan forgot all their names too.

³⁵ Probably what happened: While Michiru strangles Tomoya (again), the opportunistic Megumi goes and takes a bath.

CHAPTER 5 – COME TO THINK OF IT, THE STAGE FOR THE FINAL CHAPTER HASN'T BEEN SET YET

"Tomoya."

"Mm..."

"Tomoya!"

"...Huh?"

The classroom was abuzz with activity during lunchtime.

Several days after that hectic weekend, on a Thursday.

Not eating, but sleeping majestically on my desk since the first period, I was unapologetically shaken awake.

"Hey, there's something I gotta to ask you."

"Hmm? Oh, you came at a great time, Yoshihiko. In return for robbing me of my precious naptime, you have the honor of buying me a curry bun for lunch."

"...I'm not sure if that makes me proud or embarrassed," grumbled Classmate A (Kamigou Yoshihiko) as he produced a melon bun and sat on the chair in front of me.

"What's up?"

To reward his devotion, I decided that it was only right of me to expend no more than 300 calories on this conversation.

"Man, you've been sleeping as soon as you step through the door lately. Been working hard?"

"Yeah, I'm kind of caught up in something right now."

Despite somehow making it through that incredible weekend alive, it seems that I've only steadily gotten busier since.

I haven't slept a wink at home. Instead, I've been abusing my brain and banging away at the keyboard until morning, all while writhing in agony from gastric pains.

Like Yoshihiko said, even though I've been coming to school during the week, it's only to recover as much energy and focus I've lost during the night as I can.

"I see, I see! So you've been working hard this year too, hmm?"

"...Huh?"

It was clear that Yoshihiko was confused — or more likely, completely ignorant — about my current situation, and I found the smug expression on his face as he repeatedly slapped my back extremely irritating.

What an idiotic waste of 100 calories.

"So what's the deal? You can tell me."

"Err... What are we talking about again?"

"The plan for the school festival? You know it starts tomorrow, right?"

"Oh... I see."

Wow, it's that time of year already?

It's no wonder nobody's bothered to interrupt my sleep the entire week.

The feeling of sudden realization was so painfully surreal and I was thoroughly disappointed by the opportunism shown by some of my classmates³⁶, but I guess some things are better left unsaid.

"I'll be disappointed if you hold an anime screening like last year. If I know you, you're planning something that'll blow everyone away again, right?"

"Nope, I've got nothing planned this year."

"Come on, you know I can help if you need me to. Just tell me already."

"Now look here..."

³⁶ Probably referring to otaku haters. The war never ends.

Last year I spent a considerable amount of time and labor on advance preparations and negotiations to secure permission to occupy the AV room for an anime marathon, but I did all of that while I was still a pure consumer otaku.

It didn't matter that all the anime screened were my own recommendations and the intermissions were filled with my lengthy analyses – my event was the most popular amongst all the ones held in classrooms.

But this year is different.

This year I've taken flight to join the ranks of creative otaku, and I'm not planning on turning back from this path.

"Well, anyway, I'm still looking forward to another good school festival."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah."

With neither the time nor the patience to figure out how to explain myself, I had already mentally abandoned Yoshihiko's long spiel about the school festival and was waiting for him to change the subject.

It doesn't even matter if I'm planning an event; the only thing Yoshihiko is good at is paying lip service.

"I hear this year's Miss Toyogasaki pageant is gonna be a close fight. The *true* queen will always be the defending champ Sawamura, though."

"Ho ho."

I can still remember last year's victor standing on top of a podium with a gold crown on her golden hair, putting on her best face and delicate smile.

"But if she actually shows up this year, it'll be interesting to see if she can pull off the triple sweep next year as well. That wouldn't be anything to sniff at."

Yeah, that would be pretty dangerous. Winning three in a row would be a straight ticket to failure in life.³⁷ Usually, anyway.

"Speaking of which, who're you bringing to the folk dance after the festival? It's limited to living girls, so dakimakura are a no go, of course."

"...You should have already calculated my chances of going when you made that last statement."

"Well you know, you should at least *consider* the possibility of a girl asking you out. That's about equivalent to the girl asking you to date her."

Once again, Yoshihiko is asking for blood. *His*.

"Oh, and I heard the drama club's going to do a rerun of last year's play."

At least they're consistent and not jumping all over the place like this conversation.

"A rerun, huh?"

"Apparently the reviews for last year's performance were too good, with some even calling it 'legendary'."

"Ah, yeah..."

I'd heard that story before.

I actually watched the play myself, and it was as good as the rumors said.

But it definitely wasn't because of the character-bankrupt club president's solo acting, of course.

"It's rumored that a famous author wrote the script. I couldn't tell you for sure though."

That's because the scriptwriter's *nationally* acclaimed.

And the drama club is probably doing a rerun because that scriptwriter is too busy to come up with a new one this year.

* * *

"Aki-kun."

"Mm..."

"Aki-kun..."

"...Huh?"

As I lay face down in silent meditation, I couldn't tell if the hand shaking my shoulder and voice calling my name were figments of my imagination or not.

Having fulfilled my 300-calorie obligation, I couldn't be bothered to hide the displeasure on my face as I tried to look up and focus ahead even as I was sure our conversation had already come to an end.

"...Huh? Yoshihiko? Your figure's become really thin since I last saw you..."

"I see you can still make jokes while you're blind, Aki-kun."

I found myself looking eye to eye with an expressionless ponytailed girl.

³⁷ See Ogiso Setsuna, *White Album* 2.

Then scanning my surroundings, I realized that the classroom, basked in evening red, was now empty save Katou and I.

I couldn't seem to remember what happened in any of that afternoon's classes.

* * *

We found ourselves a little later than usual on the way home to the station.

"But it's been a while, Katou."

"Even though we see each other every day. Aki-kun always seems to be sleeping, so we haven't talked much."

"Aw come on, I haven't slept at all this week..."

"Aki-kun gets six hours at school every day, and that's only when I'm watching."

"...Wait, doesn't that mean you've been watching me for six hours every day?!"

"One second... I believe on the third page, I said 'You... You've got to be kidding me! Who would want anything to do with this loser?!?'"³⁸

"Yeah, I remember you said something like that. You have to stop looking at those cue cards all the time, Katou."

Talking to Katou for the first time in four days, I wondered where all the excitement she had that weekend went as she rolled on with her usual deadpan way of speaking.

I'm also beginning to wonder if going through the trouble of being on edge whenever I talk to Katou is worth it.

"Anyway, Aki-kun."

"Hmm?"

"We finished the game."

"Only the α-version though."

"Did you manage to play it all the way to the end?"

"Yeah, on Monday morning."

"Wow, that's fast. It took me until yesterday to complete it."

"Well, we've got different levels of experience as gamers, so..."

It was slipped casually into the conversation, but I was fairly surprised to learn that Katou had actually played the game.

She's the one who suggested the emergency sleepover, but I'd thought that was simply an extension of her principle of helping me within her abilities as much as she possibly could. Until now.

Now Katou's become an indispensable circle member, as equally committed as any one of Eriri, Utaha-senpai, and myself in making this product as good as it can possibly be.

Her seriousness alone was enough to move me.

...It's truly unfortunate that she's incapable of projecting that same seriousness through her appearance, though

"So?"

"Hmm?"

"That thing we could only understand by playing... Did you find it?"

"...Yes."

"So you realized it too, Aki-kun."

"You did too?"

"Mhm."

I'll remember the birth of this otaku.

Could we have finally arrived?

Arrived at that something hidden within the scenario, something that could only be revealed by playing the game?

"So what are you going to do, Aki-kun? You can't run away any more."

"...I know."

I know I have to decide.

³⁸ Volume 5, Prologue.

"You've chosen, then. You finally have an answer for Kasumigaoka-senpai."

And I'll have to tell her.

"Well, I am after all our circle's representative, and I am responsible for making the game..."

"And also a boy."

"Mmm... What?"

I couldn't say for sure, but I thought Katou had a bit of her earlier inscrutability replaced by a little skittishness and a little anxiety, accompanied by a face that seemed somewhat...lonely.

"Meguri and Ruri... Who will you choose?"

I had decided long ago on my answer, and I gave it.

"I didn't choose either of them. I chose both."

".....Eh?"

My answer to the heart of our project.

"Now I understand, Katou... Now I finally understand!"

"Ah, hmm, one second... Is this one of those 'You are both my wings' moments?"³⁹

"What did I say about those cue cards?"

Having heard my august and weighty conclusion, Katou had for some reason reverted to dryness.

Where is she getting all the lines in these prompts from anyway?

"Anyway, what I meant was that it never really was a choice between the either of the heroines. We've been missing the major, fundamental problem plaguing the game all this time!"

Perhaps it was due to the shock she received from my discovery for the ages, but Katou very subtly adopted a discomforting expression and inquired darkly:

"Erm, maybe you'd like to make yourself a little clearer?"

³⁹ Said by protagonist Alto in *Macross Frontier*, managing to infuriate both Sheryl x Alto and Ranka x Alto ships in one of the most infamous unresolved anime love triangles of all time.

* * *

"Wow, I really didn't need to hear that."

"What?"

I explained myself as clearly as Katou wished, with regards to my choice, what I was going to tell Utaha-senpai, and what I was going to do next.

Truthfully, wholeheartedly, and without deception.

It had quite obviously turned Katou off, which I could tell from her expression, attitude, and the way she now gazed fixedly at my face, sighing disgustedly.

Her character's really standing out now... in a bad way.

"Erm, I'm not sure how to say this but... as the circle's representative, Aki-kun's opinion may be correct... and also pretty intelligent, because he's the one who's ultimately in charge of making the game... but those... abilities won't allow him to survive very long in this world."

"Erm, maybe you'd like to make yourself a little clearer?"

Even the way she speaks shows she is finally waking to her potential as a deadpan snarker.

"Well, whatever. Aki-kun should go whichever way he thinks is right. Even if that way's diagonally upward."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

I'd frustrated three days and three nights over what to do, from square one all the way...

"It's all right, Aki-kun. Even if you're ridiculed as a good for nothing, a numbskull, a piece of trash, and/or the worst main character of all time, I'm sure there'll still be some people kind enough to understand you. Some people."

"And just who are those people?!"

I was sure I'd made the best decision for our circle...

"Well, I'm heading home. I'll have to consider my options."

"Like I said, what's that supposed to mean?! What about our circle? Hey!"

How did things turn out this way?

CHAPTER 6 – THE SCHOOL FESTIVAL OF DESTRUCTION AND REBIRTH

And so the day finally arrived.

A Friday late in November, the first day of the longest three-day period in Toyogasaki's calendar.

The Toyogasaki school festival.

With the opening ceremony held in the gymnasium finally out of the way, the various classrooms rang out with the sounds of good business, and the entire compound seemed to be at once consumed with a bustling atmosphere.

Toyogasaki prides itself on its status as an in vogue private institution and its culture of relative liberty, both of which attract plenty of visitors from the city and other schools to a festival famous for its liveliness.

The pandemonium only ends with the folk dance on the last day.

"Hey, Tomoya! When's your screening starting? I can't find it anywhere in the pamphlet."

"Didn't I tell you I wasn't doing anything this year? Sorry, but I've got to go."

Within the maelstrom of activity, I found myself running down the corridors, paying scarce attention to all the commotion around me... Well, actually, breeze-walking in strict accordance with the school rules.

With my eyes swollen red and skin puffy from four days' worth of sleepless nights, I wasn't in any condition to enjoy the festival.

I had other things to attend to anyway.

There's someone I absolutely must find by today, talk to by tomorrow and satisfy by the day after... Only that the same person, who had me running around the school all morning, was nowhere to be found.

She was unreachable by phone, unresponsive to my texts, and absent from my classroom.

It's as if she's disappeared completely.

"Oh, Ota-Tomoya? Megumi's not with you? I haven't seen her at all today..."

"She must have escaped when you weren't looking, as usual."

Just saying, but the person I'm looking for isn't Katou.

That aside, I've already wasted half a day and have every right to be feeling frustrated and exhausted. Yet despite wanting to meet her so badly, I still found myself unbelievably calm.

It's because I know I'll definitely meet her when the time's right.

I won't enjoy it when it happens, but I'll still have to settle things then, once and for all.

I'm just a little early.

She'll come, even if it's a rerun.

There's no way she'll miss her baby on stage.

* * *

Quarter past three, the gym.

The building in intermission was buzzing lightly with commotion, but you could sense the pregnant enthusiasm even in the lull.

It was the overbearing expectation of the next item.

"Is this seat taken?"

"Yes... By you."

While unable to find a seat at the first performance of the day, I was more fortunate this time around as I spoke softly to the long-haired girl in the adjacent seat.

"It's been a while."

"Indeed."

As we conversed, fast-paced preparations began on the set for the imminent performance.

Faithful to the original concept of a cultural festival, all the stage items of the day thus far had featured the pride of their respective cultural clubs. None reeked of the triviality typically found in this kind of self-organized concert.

"It's really only been two weeks, but it feels like so much longer."

"Indeed."

Starting momentarily would be the most highly-anticipated main event, the performance by the Drama Club.

"Speaking of which..."

"Hmm?"

"We watched this together last year as well, huh?"

"Hmm... I suppose we did."

Then, as the build-up abruptly concluded, all the lights in the building went out, drawing the attention of the audience towards the stage now basking in the spotlight.

The emcee began narrating the start of the performance right on cue.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. The play 「Harmony Rhapsody」 brought to you by the Drama Club will be commencing shortly. The script of this play was written by Kasumigaoka Utaha, production..."

You guessed it.

The play which drew such adulation at its inaugural run during last year's festival – even receiving prizes for scriptwriting at certain competitions – also happened to be Utaha-senpai's first and only attempt so far at theatrical scriptwriting.

The novelist who wrote this legendary drama in her spare time now sat in the seat next to mine, watching the stage expressionlessly.

* * *

While my anime marathon screening ran for most of the three days at last year's festival, there was a brief two-hour pause starting from 3 PM on the first day called at the organizer's discretion.

I was in this same place together with the same person watching the same drama then.

"Wow, I can already feel the tension at the very beginning, just like last time."

"If I recall correctly, the script was so thick and the lines so numerous it brought the president to tears."

"...I don't think that was the only reason they were crying."

To my considerable misfortune, I had already gotten to experience the terror of working with Utaha-senpai – or perhaps more accurately, the author known as Kasumi Utako – in advance of the festival.

Those three hours of rehearsals I observed at the Drama Club covered only about 10% of all the scenes in the play, but I will never forget how the devil-scriptwriter's reserved, yet tempestuous whispers of "Cut" presaged almost thirty re-takes in those five minutes of actual stage time, and eventually forced three club members to flee in desperation.

Utaha-senpai never did anything as pretentious as raising her voice or making the exaggerated gestures of a conceited director.

Adopting a nuanced approach and managing subtle changes in tempo, she relentlessly enforced training until the end product was exactly as she had envisioned it to be.

Utaha-senpai never once apologized for her obsession with detail or her stubbornness, the latter of which inevitably incurred the wrath of the club members. She never once made concessions for bad acting, a cosmetic appreciation of the script, or a clear lack of talent right from the outset; she would only softly, meticulously, venomously and unceasingly grind away like a blade of pure ice.

They were only amateur actors and high-schoolers, hardly deserving of having their hearts broken repeatedly by the vocabulary of a Best New Author.

"Still, the script's just as fascinating no matter how many times I watch it."

"That should be attributed to the skill of the actors. You should praise them if you really want to praise somebody."

Acting in the play they've now had a year-long relationship with, we should definitely commend these maso- I mean, elites for having made it through the hell of training.

At the same time, I would also like to compliment myself for sitting through an additional three hours of listening to the devil-scriptwriter's complaints after that training session.

And perhaps also a certain *main heroine* for surviving Utaha-senpai's roughing on devil mode.⁴⁰

"...And so?"

"Yes?"

⁴⁰ Volume 1, Chapter 6.

"Wasn't there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Ah..."

"I trust you've come to see me with an answer?"

"...Yes, but right now's a little..."

The excitement in the building was increasing palpably as action erupted. Tensions flared and lines fired rapidly back and forth across the stage.

The play was already good to begin with, but the new and improved product of a year's worth of additional refinement had the other members of the audience completely captivated.

To turn away now would be an unforgivable waste of the spectacle unfolding in front of our eyes.

"It's all right, we've seen it enough times."

"...Really?"

So why have you been here since the first show?

"Besides, I won't be able to concentrate until I've heard Ethics-kun's answer."

"Eh?"

Taken aback, I turned to catch Utaha-senpai's profile.

Preoccupied with my own affairs, I had completely failed to notice her flushed cheeks, the thin film of sweat on her forehead and her body, rigidly alert until now.

Add in the characteristic pointed tapping of her foot⁴¹ and it's apparent that she's nervous about something.

"It's alright, I'm prepared. If it's a death sentence you have for me... Deliver it swiftly."

"...Death sentence?"

But I instantly realized that Utaha-senpai was clearly not exaggerating.

Because while Senpai had put all her effort into creating those two scenarios, one of them was about to be erased into oblivion.

As a creator, seeing something you created unable to come into being may be as painful as losing as a part of yourself.

"Which did you choose, Ethics-kun? The original? Or the second?"

"..."

Now she's even more agitated than before.

Though I had long since come to terms with the weight of the decision I made, I found myself slowly assaulted by an intense pressure as I began to consider the now-likely possibility of Utaha-senpai reacting more adversely to that decision than I had initially anticipated.

"Did you choose Meguri? Or perhaps... Ruri?"

I certainly hope not, but even though Senpai's prepared herself to this extent... I may still end up wounding her deeply.

It's because my decision's more gutwrenching than choosing either one of the two – a *rejection*.

"My decision is to do a retake... To redo it over again."

Not a death sentence, but forced labor.

"..."

"..."

Claps and cheers erupted universally across the gym.

The shock from the abrupt end of the first act and the immediate expectation of the second conspired to produce an air of almost abnormal tension.

Amid all the excitement, there were only two people in the gym passive and unsmiling.

"...Why?"

"Utaha-senpai..."

I only heard Utaha-senpai's soft whisper after the cacophony from the surrounding seats died down several minutes later.

⁴¹ Interesting aside for Western readers: The expression for tapping one's foot in Japanese is "貧乏揺すり" which translated literally is something like "shaking your money away". An Oriental superstition.

"What was unacceptable? Which parts of the scenarios were bad?"

"They were godlike. Both."

And incredibly riveting.

The original was fun, interesting, refreshing – the quality of entertainment was awesome. And Meguri was very cute.

The second was tear-jerking, painful, gut-wrenching – truly an amazing read. Ruri was heartbreaking.

"So... So why?"

"Well, the thing is... Both are fundamentally unsuited to being made into games."

They would make really godlike novels.

Just not godlike "*paper drama*" galge.

* * *

We left the gym for the courtyard, which was bustling with students advertising, guests lining up and consuming yakisoba, takoyaki — and even shaved ice, even though it was the middle of November — from the various food stands there.

"It's all my fault."

"..."

Utaha-senpai and I sat a mere 10 centimeters apart on a bench.

Senpai never reached for the takoyaki I offered her, staring passively at her hands placed on her knees.

"It's all my fault for trusting Utaha-senpai too much."

"..."

Utaha-senpai used her hands to reply instead to my latest words, as they suddenly grasped her knees tightly, letting her nails sink in.

"The scenarios don't work in a game... If we put them in one, it wouldn't be interesting at all."

Senpai's reacting to my rejection – to having the fruit of her labor rejected by her most fervent believer.

In the end, Senpai's stories are both *too* consistent.

Regardless of whether we choose the first or the second, the objective is always to arrive at a single, definitive conclusion at the very end.

Each story's exigency, development, foreshadowing – all of it is for the climactic end.

What I had asked for was a sub-scenario – a secondary heroine's ending that would under no circumstance affect the main plot and become anything more than an accessory.

Because otherwise, there wouldn't be any fans of the secondary heroine.

The sub-scenario wouldn't leave a lasting impression on anybody.

"It was *Kasumi Utako* who wrote the scenarios."

An additional problem is the presence of two linear scenarios, made worse by the lack of any attempt to reconcile them.

It's almost as if Utaha-senpai *insists* on throwing one away.

While both stories are good enough to make you cry tears of both happiness and grief, I cannot see how they can be put into a single game in their present states.

"It wasn't *Kasumigaoka Utaha* – our scenario writer – who wrote it, Utaha-senpai."

Those two novels could never be made into one game.

No matter how beautiful the scripts are, or how skilled the game creators are, that game will never become a reality.

"So I'm sorry, but I'm henceforth rejecting both of Senpai's scenarios."

And in that instant, it felt as if all sound had disappeared from the world.

While I was surely the one who was attacking, it felt like I was on the receiving end of a finishing blow instead as I found myself disconnecting from reality.

I was beginning to understand the difficulty, regret and pain of rejecting Senpai – someone I've always chased after, admired and believed in.

"..."

Utaha-senpai still hadn't said a word since we arrived here.

But I'm sure she knows she can't stay this way for much longer.

She's going to make her move soon.

I'll have to use what remaining time I have to desperately think about how I should react.

I should first list out all the actions Senpai is likely to take, followed by my optimal responses.

1. The Slap

» look at her in surprise » she cries » I cannot resist hugging her » before we know it our eyes meet »

Event CG: Kissing the heroine (protagonist's face shown at director's discretion) » theatrical blackout » sparrow cries

2. Running away

» give chase » search for her » catch her » she turns around to reveal her crying face » I cannot resist hugging her » see above

3. Crying

» I cannot resist (ry⁴²

4. Insanity

» Your punishment must be more severe » Now we'll be together forever

...But this galge style of thinking won't do.

All the above happy endings are traps.

And besides, only Azumi Seiji⁴³ would ever have to deal with these kinds of developments.

⁴² Shorthand for "ryaku" in Japanese netspeak, used to truncate a sentence you've already heard. Similar to quotation marks.

⁴³ Protagonist, 「cherry blessing」, also known as the game 「blessing software」 is producing.

"I... see."

"U-Utaha-senpai?"

I was jolted back to reality from the dark futility and gravity of the whole situation by a much calmer reaction than what I had been waiting nervously for.

"I understand, I *really* do."

"Eh?"

"And I... Even though..."

"Erm, Utaha-senpai, I'm sorry but..."

Her reaction turned out to be something different entirely.

While it was impossible to arrive at any definitive conclusion using only the words in each fragment of broken speech that came out of Senpai's mouth, it certainly felt like a terrifyingly intense battle was taking place within her.

"You've got to be kidding me, you... You good-for-nothing rascal! I'll... Hmpf!"

"Senpai, could you either speak clearly or not at all? Preferably the latter?"

I'm not trying to be a hard-of-hearing protagonist on purpose, okay?

It's all Senpai's fault for fiddling with her volume control.

"Ethics!"

"You know, if you're going to drop the '-kun', you might as well call me Tomoya..."

And as Utaha-senpai finally made up her mind to speak clearly rather than remain silent, she finally looked up firmly at me... Or rather, stared daggers *into* me.



"You must have some courage to question my scenarios. Very well, I will now do you a favor by crushing you."

"Ehhhhh?!"

1. Kneel

2. Run

3. Cry

"I will destroy you conclusively using all the resentment and pain I have accumulated this past year. Your existence as a creator is as good as over."

"N-N-Now just wait a minute, Senpai!"

The time for me to select one of those three actions expired, and Utaha-senpai went completely out of character... or on second thought, unwittingly revealed her true self as she let loose with unceasingly abusive language.

I expected Senpai to be dejected after all that, but she's high-strung now.

But whatever.

"Prepare yourself, Ethics-kun – we'll be starting immediately."

"...Are you sure? Are you sure you want to go toe to toe with me, Utaha-senpai?"

Senpai's given me a golden opportunity.

"Sure. I'll play along as long as your criticism's valid."

"Just asking, but you haven't forgotten that as director, I have greater authority than any writer or illustrator, right?"

"So? Are you saying you'll resign if you're wrong?"

"Of course. Nothing good will come from me bulldozing my own agenda. In the end, I only want us to make as good of a game as we possibly can."

This is probably also the last chance Kasumi Utako will give me.

But before I return to being just a fan, I get to be as selfish as I want.

"Then there's only one thing I have to do – to make you admit that my scenarios are correct. Or rather, I'll force you to. You'll be on your knees in very short order."

"Like those Drama Club members?"

Sometime in the course of always chasing Utaha-senpai and Eriri, maybe I ended up pursuing the dream of becoming a creator as well.

"Oh, I'll be very disappointed if your defense is going to be as shoddy as theirs' was."

"You're underestimating Kasumi Utako's strongest disciple."

"And you're not fit to call yourself a disciple or even a believer when you're just a mere *lackey*."

"Oh, nobody knows your style of writing better than I do."

But now I think it's time I give my two great senpais reason for pause if they ever think about ridiculing me again.

"Kasumi Utako's greatest strengths... and her greatest *weaknesses* – I know them all, better than *she* does."

Let the master-disciple fight of the century begin.

* * *

"In fact, I've already put some thought into how we'll go about doing the retake... Take a look at this, if you will."

Having shifted from the courtyard into one of the school buildings, I spread my materials over a table as we quickly got down to business.

"...I see you came well-prepared."

"Well, I try not to make the same mistakes twice."

This is the second time I've clashed with Utaha-senpai over our project.

I was guilty of incompetence the first time this happened, when I said things like "It's wrong, but I don't know why," back when there were still disagreements over the plot.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See Volume 2. Alternatively, see that infamous hotel scene in the anime (can't be bothered to find the episode number).

But that's why I've strived for perfection this time – by clearly listing the problems of the current scenarios and preparing a four-day plan for rectifying those mistakes.

"What's... this?" was all Utaha-senpai managed to ask darkly after looking through one page's worth of material.

Problems with Kasumi Utako's new game scenarios:

1. The two different main routes cannot be put into one game
2. Weaknesses of the resulting scenario
 - » A short sub-scenario and an unimpressionable ending
 - » Weak secondary heroines that don't have any moe when contrasted with the main heroine
 - » Weak horizontal connection within the various routes, making the game feel like it has only one main route
3. Weak relationship between choice selection and gameplay
 - » Returning to prose immediately after choice branches
 - » Choices are absolute; every decision you make forces you onto a different route
 - » Character reactions after making different choices are largely the same
4. Game text imbalance
 - » Character's feelings are always expressed through text, with no space for contribution from the illustrations or production
 - » Unable to flesh out characters with distinctive speech patterns due to lack of spoken lines
 - » Lack of actual "actions" due to overemphasis on following the characters' thought processes

"Well, if I were to put it briefly, the main problem is that Utaha-senpai has yet to adapt her writing style to one suited for creating a game scenario."

"..."

"But I think Senpai will transition into scenario writing fairly smoothly once she's tried her hand at writing for a few games... and relinquished a little of her novelist's pride."

"....."

"We can solve the problem of inexperience almost immediately, but the hubris is going to be another matter entirely... If I remember correctly, ever since Senpai starting selling books and receiving critique, she hasn't listened to anyone's opinion except maybe Machida-san's..."

"Y-You consumerist pig! How dare you be so condescending!"

Senpai's wrath was no longer limited to her voice, as her face took upon a hellish look as well.

"Then prove to me you're better than that. Instead of simply writing the scenario, do you think could make a good game?"

"...You know very well I can't do that!"

"Oh, yes you can! You can always start by playing. Play our game and compare it against others. Then maybe you'll understand what kind of twisted, monotonous, shitty game devoid of a single iota of fun we've made!"

My sleep-starved head was throbbing as hard as my aching heart.

Though I was more than convinced about the accuracy of my judgment, throwing the kitchen sink of everything I'm justified in saying but never meant to point out to at the person who mattered to me the most still hurt very much.

"Wasn't it supposed to be a VN and not a game per se? Who looks for gameplay in VNs anyway?"

"Don't you dare underestimate VNs! You can't say that when you haven't even experienced the true power of virtual paper drama. Have you been working on our project under that pretense all this time? How were we ever supposed to make a good product like that?!"

"Y-You take that back this instant!"

"No I won't! Not while you make a fool out of VNs!"

"I'm the one being made a fool of by you, Tomoya-kun!"

At least Utaha-senpai's fully engaged now.

The proof?

"Ethics-kun" is gone.

"I devoted countless days... sacrificed my soul... spat blood – I gave *everything* to write this for you... So don't reject me like this..."

"Who told me that the end was everything, and effort didn't matter?"

If I let her win now, we'll never be able to make up again.

But if I win, she might never be able to get back on her feet again.

Either way, we can only move forward.

"Erm, Kasumigaoka-san... Could I have a moment?"

And at that moment, for some reason, a girl wearing a maid outfit who appeared to be crying broke into our conversation.

"Please, I'm in the middle of something important."

"If you care about this class even a little, Kasumigaoka-san, I would really appreciate if you could leave as soon as possible... taking him with you."

"..."

"..."

Erm... And so, having shifted from the courtyard into one of the school buildings, we chose to go to Utaha-senpai's—Class 3-C's—homeroom, and quickly got down to business.

Today the classroom was decked out for the much-publicized 「Maid Café 3-C」 and business was at its peak.

...Only all the guests were missing because of our grand debate.

* * *

The building's clock pointed to 7.

The landscape outside the window was now shrouded in the darkness of an autumn night, and the bustling classrooms and corridors had long since returned to their default, silent state.

But not entirely, though.

In the yard and in some classrooms, students working through the night could be heard preparing for tomorrow's events.

Staying this late would normally be in violation of the school's rules, but well... it seems Toyogasaki's faculty also becomes more agreeable when the school festival comes around.

"Well? Was it good, Utaha-senpai?"

"..."

Though I wonder if they would be so benevolent if they knew that a certain couple was sitting shoulder to shoulder in a squeezy dark room, taking advantage of the situation.

"I don't think I need to mention it, but I didn't do this on a whim."

"...I know."

"Katou and I, together with some other people later on, also spat blood and sacrificed our souls for two straight days trying to make this."

"I said I understand, didn't I?"

But even though we're in such a... *dangerous* predicament, it's not the right time for discussions of a suggestive nature.

...And don't ask me if that means we talk like that normally either. I wouldn't know how to answer.

"How do you think it compares with the trial from 「rouge en rouge」 you played earlier?"

"..."

"Boring, right? The story's interesting, but it just doesn't *feel* like a game, does it?"

"...Tch."

We were in the AV prep and projector room next to the AV room.

With the lights off, the dim illumination of the display cast the faint shadows of two figures onto the walls of the room.

Utaha-senpai and I had spent the evening holed up in this dark, cramped room playing games on the room's main computer.

"Do you understand now, Utaha-senpai?"

And now, we were halfway through playing a sample version of our own game.

The game which had so much promise, but flopped – the game which perplexed me so much when I first tested it earlier this week.

"Senpai can't even match a doujin game writer right now, let alone a professional one."

"Stop."

"That's where Kasumi Utako stands as a scenario writer right now. We don't have any hope of moving forward with our game if you can't see that, Utaha-senpai."

"STOP!"

It was an angry and intense scream of denial, one I almost couldn't believe came from Utaha-senpai.

In fact, I'd never heard such an anguished voice in my entire life.

"We can't make definitive inferences like that when it's still so incomplete..."

"Do you truly think so, Utaha-senpai?"

There's no denying that it's an unfinished product.

The event CGs are virtually absent, and some standing poses haven't been layered on.

The soundtrack consists of three songs which don't even cover all the scenes.

And of course, we don't have any special effects worth the name.

"If we tighten up the production just a little, maybe the result will be completely different..."

"I've already tried making adjustments myself but... I couldn't."

But when the mouse clicks, the text flows.

Proceeding with the story according to its own will...

Changing the development of the plot with its own decisions...

Arriving at the conclusion it chose.

Even if the game isn't complete, the text certainly is.

"And do you know why I couldn't, Senpai?"

"...You didn't have enough time?"

"Nope. In fact, I spent all week tinkering with the script."

Tinkering with the script like a man possessed.

I refused to give up on the scenario until the very end, dabbling purely in the game's presentation.

"This was the outcome."

The text is everything – and that isn't a good thing.

The words tell *everything* – that's why I couldn't do *anything*.

"It's turned into a novel."

There was no space for scripting, no space for illustration to enhance the text, no space for music to add excitement to the story.

The text is *perfect*.⁴⁵

Adding anything wouldn't create any fresh excitement at all.

It doesn't feel any different from reading a book.

"And Utaha-senpai, you're wasting time searching for explanations that don't hold any water. I think you already know why this doesn't work."

"...Shut up."

"I'm sure even you don't think it's a game, Utaha-senpai."

"You're really getting on my nerves, you know that?"

Ultimately, it was the work of Kasumi Utako.

A doujin *novel*, with a dash of Kashiwagi Eri's art and Hyoudou Michiru's soundtrack sprinkled in.

"I think I already said this before, but the fault isn't Utaha-senpai's, but mine as a director."

Utaha-senpai is a true creator, and the perfect novelist.

Justifiably conceited, and disposed to haughtiness.

Alone, she has the power to convert people into docile readers, but that isn't all.

The game world is hers to take – but only if we can leverage the disparate elements of art, music, production, and the uniqueness of the game medium itself.

Only then will we avoid turning the resulting game into something else entirely.

⁴⁵ Pun on the word "完全", which can mean both "everything" and "perfection".

To exercise precise control as the scenario is *being written* – that is my responsibility as director.

"That's why we don't necessarily need Senpai to roll back what she's already achieved."

Instead, it's *my* turn to do some serious soul-searching.

At this juncture, I've lost to lori.

Not only that, but my enemy has both analyzed my failure and schooled me about it.

After playing 「rouge en rouge」 's trial, I finally understand the basis of his confidence.

He was confident he'd done his job as director well right from the start.

He'd brought in a scenario writer with experience making games onto his team. Only after meticulously scrutinizing the content of the game and providing constructive criticism did he release a game he was confident met his standards.

Trusting your staff isn't the same as having blind faith in them.

It's only when you believe your creator will produce something you judge with your own eyes to be truly amazing that you can say that you've begun to trust her.

To think that racketeer managed to create something better than did... Man, I've been such an idiot!

"We still have a chance to turn this around. We still have time to do this over."

Utaha-senpai's mouse hand froze.

"But I need Utaha-senpai to accept that we have to first."

I knew very well that my words, while consoling on the surface, weren't the slightest bit comforting at all.

But it's the only way I can say what I need to right now.

Unfortunately...

"No, I won't accept that. There's no way I'll accept that."

Senpai is still in denial.

Kasumi Utako is clinging on to her pride and status as a star novelist.

Her pride is an absurdly obstinate foundation, but also one we don't necessarily have to, and shouldn't, undermine for the sake of our game's progress.

"Because accepting it would be equivalent to me rejecting Ethics-kun."

"...Huh?"

"If I did that, I wouldn't be able to fulfill your expectations and repay your trust."

"Utaha-senpai..."

Could it be?

Could it be that what she's holding on to isn't pride or status but...

"It would be like saying... like saying I didn't need you."

"How could I ever throw you away?"

"Don't you know how much I need you, Utaha-senpai?!"

"Will you still need me in the present as well as in the future?"

"Will you promise to still need me now and forever?"

"I would really appreciate it if you redid the scenario, Senpai."

But I have to seal those words away for now and press for a concrete answer.

"We'll probably have to compromise on the literary quality though."

Utaha-senpai, and her most ardent believer, digging together.

"Even so, I want your permission to proceed."

And destroying together.

Tearing the writer and her useless director's pride into pieces.

"We need to reset the scenario, Senpai. Please."

All so we can start again from zero.

* * *

"Right, I should print this one out next."

The printer ensconced in the corner of my room dutifully spat out page after page noisily as I hit the 'Return' key on my keyboard.

The long and short hands of my wall clock were now almost vertical.

We left the projection room around the time when staying any longer would have run us the risk of giving people the wrong idea, so, while making absolutely sure to remain unseen, we exfiltrated the corridors and then the schoolyard before finally arriving at my house.

"...Isn't it a bit noisy?"

"..."

And that was how I rescued Sleeping Beauty without saying a word.

In the end, Utaha-senpai never replied to my request for a retake.

I was successful in prodding her onto the train and through the entranceway of my house... until she reached my room and promptly snuggled into my bed.

In the hour since then, Senpai hasn't slept nor spoken, but remained utterly expressionless and emotionless.

And so, unsure if I was supposed to proceed or not, I eventually decided to concentrate all my resources on what I *could* do.

And no, that doesn't mean I was being smothered by Utaha-senpai as she consoled me teasingly with something like, "*Aww, I didn't mean to do that. Cheer up, okay?*" or anything of the sort.

I was brushing up the 「Problems with Kasumi Utako's new game scenarios」 document, with which I had used to betray Utaha-senpai that afternoon.

If I can present the problems calmly once more, maybe she'll finally agree to an edit of the scenario – not counting the week's worth of sleepless nights I've spent doing that and afternoon naps I've had since Sunday.

I've been on the keyboard so much that I'm beginning to lose sensation in my fingertips.

But you know, I might as well continue working since I can't sleep now anyway.

The anxiety I feel because of our unfinished game and the uneasiness resulting from the question of whether we'll be able to make Winter Comiket is keeping me awake.

And of course, the person stretched out on my bed behind me who can't even be bothered to finish a light novel at the moment, let alone open her mouth to speak and yet isn't showing any sign of getting sleepy, isn't helping either.

I glanced at the clock again and realized that it was going to be a new day soon.

The second day of the school festival.

When the weekend crowd causes the already-ridiculous numbers to swell even further, and the self-organized performances in the gym become stuffy all of sudden – Toyogasaki will show off another of its many faces.

But I don't think we'll be found amongst the pandemonium.

I have a good feeling tomorrow is when our final battle begins.

Tomorrow, we build the final framework of our product.

"*sniff* Ooh, oooh... *sniff*"

"Ahh...*sniff*"

As for the sucking sounds coming from behind me, it would be best if we all made a determined effort to pretend like we never heard them at all.

* * *

"...Hmm?"

I suddenly realized that the sky outside the window had some time ago turned bright.

There weren't any sparrows to be heard, but the nostalgic *coocoo-coo-coo-* of a lone pigeon from somewhere in the distance made me wonder for a moment if I was really in a city or not.

That aside, I looked at the clock and saw that it was already past seven.

It appears that I had crashed- well, maybe spaced out for just a little.

"Uahhhh..."

I proceeded to yaw- I mean, stretch off my accumulated fatigue.

"Oh, you're awake."

"I wasn't sleeping, okay?!"

I definitely wasn't sleeping!

For some reason it feels like I've been saying that every morning lately, which makes me wonder if I've really been pulling all-nighters at all.

This can't be one of those "I'm not sleeping! I'm not sleeping!" scams right?⁴⁶

Wait no, I've got to tackle this delicate problem seriously.

If I say I've stayed up all night, then that means I've stayed up all night.

If I say I want to cosplay tomorrow even if I haven't made more than a page's worth of progress on something which isn't even anything more than a draft yet, then I'll just find satisfaction from the effort I've already put in while carefully shifting the deadline to the back of my mind.

And don't tell me calling it "effort" was a bit of a stretch.

"Hmm... So, where was I again?"

"Well, I've gone through everything once for now."

"Oh, my bad, Utaha-senpa- huh?"

I began to get the faint feeling that something was wrong as I slowly shook myself out of the peculiar train of thought I had fallen into and concentrated on the display in front of me.

Printouts of the material I had prepared the night before were spread out across the table in front of me.

That wasn't exactly a problem since I planned to work with them today, but...

"Utaha...senpai?"

I snapped back to reality almost instantly as I finally saw the writing in red ink on the paper that wasn't there the night before and registered the distinctively dispiriting voice I had been hearing.

⁴⁶ Probably a shout-out to Misawa of Hell's (地獄のミサワ, a popular mangaka) "I only slept for two hours! (二時間寝てないわ)" series, where the main character gets caught sleeping at work and makes different excuses for himself each time. Examples: <http://ruteth.cocolog-nifty.com/diary/2010/03/2-ebd7.html>

"Good morning."

"Ah..."

That distinctively dispiriting voice.

And that same distinctively sleepy face.

Not the person so full of resentment yesterday, but the same person she's always been.

The same person I've always known, the same person who always leaves me feeling so helpless, the same person who- well, the same old Utaha-senpai.

* * *

"So, Ethics-kun, I feel bad since you just woke up, but we need to talk."

"O-Oh, that's alright. It's not like I was really sleeping anyway."

"Just shut up and listen."

"Okay."

As we sat across the table facing each other, it didn't feel like we were master and disciple anymore, but fast becoming female teacher and male student.

Looks like Utaha-senpai's attitude, along with her tone and expression, had since returned to normal too.

I noticed her eyes were tinged slightly with red, but I just assumed those were the same symptoms of sleep-deprivation I had.

"First of all, I'd like you to take a look at this," Utaha-senpai said as she held out the printout marked in red I had discovered when I woke... or rather, materialized when I wasn't looking.

"After reviewing Ethics-kun's opinions, I've since corrected several areas I'm not prepared to accept, areas where Ethics-kun is clearly mistaken, in addition to Ethics-kun's spelling and grammar... all of which we can debate over presently."

"Wow..."

I could feel the full extent of Senpai's obstinacy in the way she so passionately saturated those few pieces of paper with red, crushing my week's worth of exertion in a matter of a few hours.

"Oh, this isn't as big of a deal as you make it out to be. Machida-san made more than three hundred amendments once, back when I made my commercial debut."

"B-But Senpai, this..."

To be so stubborn in force-editing her way through...

"It's taken me two years to trim those numbers to thirty. I suppose that only goes to show how onerous the writing profession truly is."

"Senpai, that's not what I-"

"So I reckon it's not all that surprising that I'm being asked to do a retake right after my first attempt at writing game scenarios."

"Ah..."

Ever so provocative, mischievous – Sleeping Beauty has completed her transfiguration into the witch she always was.

"We're wasting time, Ethics-kun. I'm going to make a scenario that surpasses 「rouge en rouge」 's at the very least. I wouldn't want Sawamura-san to blame her loss on *my* scenario."

"Haha..."

Her words and tone were both dark, overconfident, dark, optimistic and of course, dark.

"Then once I'm finished with that, I'll have you prepare for the *punishment* I'm going to give you."

"...I'll keep that in mind."

Dark, and a nasty piece of work.

"Oh, I forgot to mention that I gave a little of that punishment in advance."

"...Meaning?"

"I procured another picture of your sleeping face, thank you very much."

"There's only me in it this time round, right?!"⁴⁷

Oh, and did I mention that she's dark?

⁴⁷ Once again, immortal hotel scene.

The best Senpai around, that is.

* * *

"To choose neither and yet choose both... What do you mean?"

We decided to tackle our greatest problem first:

「1. The two different main routes cannot be put into one game」

What to do with the two main routes Utaha-senpai wrote on a whim... or rather produced through her phantasmagoric creative tendencies.

"What I'm suggesting is that we adapt both scripts not just into the story, but also into the main route as well."

"But that would muddy the theme of the game."

I'm fairly sure Senpai had already predicted my next suggestion and had formed her own conclusion long in advance.

That would easily explain not only her total lack of surprise, but also her frown and immediate rebuttal.

"The two scenarios are diametrically opposed. Trying to put them into one game would be like making mulligan stew."

Fortunately, I've anticipated Senpai's answer as well.

The original script and the second.

An action-adventure romance story, and a tragic love story of birth, death and rebirth.

A return to a peaceful world and an endless journey through the interstices of time.

Meguri's true happily ever after and Ruri's bittersweet end.

Ruri's lost memories and Meguri's endless wait for Seiji, who will never return.

Those same characters in the same universe, living two stories with completely different development, sprinting towards completely different conclusions, were like the same actors in different roles acting out two separate plays.

To derive two vastly different interpretations of the same plot... The author of those scenarios must be something else entirely.

Either way, it's not difficult to envision contradictions arising and threatening the integrity of the game in an attempt to make both scenarios coexist.

Still...

"What's wrong with mulligan stew? I like mulligan stew."

"What? That's not a bad thing?"

Utaha-senpai's reply was as puzzled as mine.

"Aren't galge more fun that way?"

A metamorphosing main character, time-traveling heroines, a final boss battle on the moon – these are the things that make high-school love stories interesting.

All games widely accepted as masterpieces leave their audiences scratching their heads with these kinds of developments at first – it's just that I don't have the time to name them all.

"We mustn't be so rigid in our thinking! These are galge we're talking about here, and doujin ones at that."

"I don't see how your way of thinking takes galge seriously either."

"Actually, from my perspective, I think I'm complimenting them."

"Ethics-kun..."

"Rather than a top-level finished product, I'd rather take a second-rate work that makes me ask myself whether it will be a masterpiece or deficient at the very end; one that gives me the sense of expectation that can only come from imperfection, and one that can provide me the thrill of not knowing what happens next."

In the end, I guess the stupidest genres are still my favorites.

"Come on! Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Senpai! Let's savor the thrill!"

"I think trying to meet the deadline will be fairly thrilling already."

"Oh, come on, Senpai, you know my one rule is to not be bound by rules."

"...So Ethics-kun's suggesting we do a story unbound by rules – a limitless game which might even have two *True* ends?"

"No, that's not it either, Utaha-senpai."

"Then?"

"I'm suggesting we have *three True* ends."

* * *

"Isn't that really... stupid?"

"I admit it sounds pretty dumb."

The long and short hands of my wall clock were once again vertical, but this time it was midday on Saturday.

It was also the third time Utaha-senpai found something ridiculous.

The first was rewriting a new scenario at this late stage.

The second was the number of sections in the old scenarios that required revision.

And the third was...

"You want to finish by tomorrow?!"

"I have to pass Eriri the finalized script by Monday, or else the event CGs won't be done in time."

"That isn't something you should be saying so breezily with a careless expression on your face."

What I'm suggesting isn't much, but I'll only have another day and a half to get it done.

"But Ethics-kun, you're tired."

"I know, but I'm not hallucinating about any aliens coming to abduct me yet."

"How much text are you planning to fix? A complete overhaul might take more than *two weeks*."

"That's where you're mistaken, Utaha-senpai."

"What do you mean?"

"We're not fixing a novel, we're fixing a game scenario."

"What's the difference?"

"We're fixing a certain creator's obsession with her work, the name of whom is secondary."

"...I'm not sure I like where this is going."

"Deadline over artistry. Post-process over self. When faced with a limited amount of time, working as much as possible while staying within your means is most crucial."

Meeting deadlines is the most important thing in a group project such as ours.

Doing so would preclude certain situations such as having to employ six writers to complete a scenario for a voiced game and clean up the original writer's mess after he fled, all so monologue could be added to the lines already recorded.

Not only did the salvaged scenario receive negative reviews, but the deserting writer suddenly returned to take credit for the scenario he had no hand in writing on his blog. Everything mentioned previously are just rumors, of course.

"And you think you can make a masterpiece that way?"

"I can say for certain that it *won't* be one if we don't do it this way."

"But..."

Some masterpieces have postponed releases, and some masterpieces are finished one month ahead of schedule.

And there are a lot more shitty games made on loose schedules that I can't be bothered to count.

It's not right to simply assume that the time spent in production and product quality have a causal relationship.

"And what's more, if we don't release this game during Winter Comiket... We'll never get to release it at all."

"..."

Because...

Because Utaha-senpai's time with us is almost up...

We should enjoy ourselves as much as possible... *together*.

"But Ethics-kun..."

Utaha-senpai let her sentence trail as she looked down in thought.

When our eyes met again, Senpai didn't make another comment about the absurdity of the situation, but regarded me with a genuine expression instead.

"No matter how much I may prioritize meeting the deadline, I'm afraid it's still physically impossible for me to do this alone."

"I... see."

I held Senpai's gaze, reciprocating her honesty.

I could feel the piercing look in those eyes, fixed upon me.

"That's why I need you to prepare yourself."

I'm pretty sure some part of me knew it was going to come to this.

Something unthinkable and outrageous.

"You're going to write, Ethics-kun."

Something outrageously fun.

"I think three scenarios should be enough. I only need you to write that story you insist on arm-twisting your way into creation."

"...You're sure about this, Senpai?"

When spring comes, we'll never be able to do this again.

Even if we find ourselves in similar circumstances, it won't be the same.

"Is it really all right for me to meddle with the text Utaha-senpai wrote?"

"Don't you know my style of writing best?"

"Ha, haha..."

"More than Kasumi Utako herself?"

So here, at this last school festival...

* * *

"By the way, Senpai."

Saturday, 3 PM.

Three hours since we decided on our path forward and began work.

I turned and glanced backwards for the first time in a while.

Following Senpai's advice to "*Write like mad and (not) stop for anything*," instead of thinking with my head, I let my emotions control the flow of text.

"What? Keep it short, I'm a little busy."

Typing away at a laptop, Utaha-senpai didn't bother to return eye contact as she answered while focused on producing text at a rate even faster than me.

"Tell me how much I should write again?"

"Hmm... Not much, considering that the fork in the plot has been pushed reasonably far back. I'd say you only have about one hour's worth of play time to do."

"...And how much is that in writing?"

"Half a light novel. Probably more."

I have one and a half days left, so...

"Wait, isn't that the same as asking me to write a light novel in three days?! How could I possibly do that?"

"Well, I can't. The quality would suffer if I tried. My grammar and spelling would go completely out the window."

"B-but I-"

"Ethics-kun, remind me again, what's the most important thing in making a game?"

".....Meeting deadlines?"

"*Exactly*. I have faith in you, Ethics-kun. You shall surpass your master in speed, if nothing else."

"Ahaha, haha..."

I'm scaling an unconquered peak, one even Kasumi Utako can't touch.

Now I only have to fly, right?

"Hahaha... AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Shut up! You're annoying me!"

"HA-eek!?"

It's 3 PM.

Utaha-senpai's finally getting into creator mode, no thanks to me.

* * *

"...Erm, Utaha-senpai."

"..."

"Senpai?"

"...What?"

I glanced briefly at the clock while turning, noting that it was already past 8.

It was the first time I noticed the darkness outside. A chill breeze blew in, lowering the temperature enough to make the room fairly cold before I realized.

"Aren't you hungry? Should I go out and get something?"

"..."

I switched off the air-conditioning and used the chance to take a break as I stretched my back.

The sound of my vertebrae snapping into place told of several hours' worth of intense fighting.

"Or should I order pizza instead? That would probably take an hour though... Yeah, I think I'll grab a bento from the convenience..."

"..."

Senpai still hasn't answered.

I guess she's probably too zoned in to return to reality right now.

Then Senpai looked up and gazed at me with eyes dazed and out of focus, as if she'd discovered something amazing.

"...Ethics-kun."

And at long last, those lips moved to form a whisper.

"You'd rather have pizza, Senpai?"

"Getting distracted by other matters while on the job... Are you sure you're serious about doing this?"

"...Eh?"

Her face turned to one of a demon's.

"How can you be thinking about sentimental considerations like food when we've only got two days left till the deadline? It's not like you'll die without eating or drinking for that long."

"B-But you can't fight on an empty-"

"You can always eat your nails if you insist. There's also the skin of your fingers, the inside of your cheeks... And if that's still not enough, you could always eat your own tongue or something."

"Won't I really die if I do that?!"

Wow, this isn't looking good.

The threat of Senpai's lateral thinking is too real when she's on creator (berserk) mode.

"You're giving up on the impossible mission you willingly gave yourself? You make me lose faith in humanity, Ethics-kun."

"No-no-no I, err... I'm just concerned about *you*, Senpai!"

And to those blatant words of deception Senpai should have immediately seen through, she said:

"Oh, I'm just fine, Ethics-kun. Once this battle is over, you'll have every chance to satisfy my accumulated physical frustration."

"Hiiiii?!"

Senpai wouldn't leave me any means of escape.

"And like a Sabbath,⁴⁸ for three days and three nights I will... he, hehe, hehehehehe."

⁴⁸ Meeting of those who practice witchcraft. Also "day of rest" – Friday evening to Saturday nightfall in Judaism, Sunday in Christianity – hence Tomoya's joke in the next line. Also a heavy metal band, if you like that kind of thing.

"But the day after is a weekday! We've got to go to school!"

The prospect of partaking in such a ritual is really too scary to think about, because I'm pretty sure live chickens aren't the only thing that will be sacrificed there.

"All right? So for the time being, eating is idiocy and sleeping is prohibited. Time wastage is to be kept to a minimum."

Licking her lips ever so lightly as she talked, the aura emanating from Utaha-senpai was far more ghastly than any devil or demon.

"B-But Senpai, you're not going to bathe until the scenario's done?"

".....I'm willing to make a fifteen-minute exception."

And suddenly all pressure was lifted.

* * *

"Senpai, do you know the reason why all galge have multiple heroines?"

"I would say it's a relief measure, to put it simply."

"Correct, although that's a more pessimistic way of phrasing it."

It's finally midnight on Sunday.

Twenty-four hours till the deadline.

Facing each other across a table in the center of the room, Utaha-senpai and I were in heated discussion.

"Secondary heroines are backups for when the main heroine doesn't capture the player's heart. Games that focus on the main heroine can't ever recover users once they're lost. Those games lose to their counterparts most of the time purely because of inferior numbers of heroines."

The subject: 「2. Weaknesses of the resulting scenario」

"Still, I just can't get excited over the image of the other heroines getting together with Seiji."

Senpai was still preoccupied with the essentiality and precedence of secondary heroines even as she proceeded on mending the sub-scenarios.

"The main plot just isn't enough of a focal point, just like any other Kasumi Utako project. Oh, the true misfortune of not choosing one heroine is that you're not allowed to pursue others!"

"...Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

But, in all likelihood, it's precisely *because* she's such an amazing author that she's fallen into this trap.

The trap of having only one established practice while ignoring all other possibilities.

"But Senpai, we can't just leave disinterested users hanging – especially in galge."

"Why?"

"Because galge don't have audiences nearly as large as light novels do. I figured that that would be pretty obvious to you."

"...That's crude."

Our main heroine could probably carry 90% of Utaha-senpai's story.

Pushing that any closer to 100% would be impossible, however.

No matter how much a creator might try, he'll still never be able to please all the thousands of people on the receiving end of his work.

"We should be arguing about how to make as many users as possible happy instead, Utaha-senpai."

To capture that last 10%, we'll become actors willing to play the dirty roles that make other people laugh.

"I know this sounds pretty corny, but I don't think there's anything wrong with trying to fool people in plain sight sometimes. Let's unleash lots of possibilities, Senpai. We'll bewitch them all!"

* * *

"Look, that's not what I meant!"

"..."

"Three choices mean three *separate* and *mutually exclusive* choices, Utaha-senpai!"

"I know."

"No you don't! You don't get it at all, Senpai!"

"...Tch."

"I don't think you could have made the correct choice any more obvious — since the other two are so boring!"

"I don't see why that's a problem."

"We have to make users *want* to choose the other options, Senpai! At the rate things are going we're going to lose!"

"It's getting really noisy in here."

"We're going to carefully script every event that progressively fleshes out the heroines' distinctive personalities all so the users can choose one of them, but we aren't going to prepare three different and interesting actions for the protagonist to take?"

"If we're going to go that far, then why not just brush up the original story?"

"If we do that, then the original story will overshadow everything else! Look, Senpai, at the end of it all, I only want the same thing as you."

"Then we can just work on the original story!"

"But my interest is in *choices*. That's my prerogative as director!"

"Then you can be your own writer too! Go ahead and write your own main scenario!"

"Well, I can't help that my hand won't move!"

"That's called *escapism*, Loser-kun!"

"OOOOOH! I heard that, Senpai! You just called me the worst possible thing, didn't you?"

"You are so irritating, Ethics-kun!"

And thus the clock struck 3.

Sleepiness, fatigue, hunger, and an atmosphere that went completely south all conspired to lure us into creative hell.

* * *

"No, that isn't how you do it."

"..."

"Scenarios aren't made for you to lunge in with your emotions like that, Ethics-kun."

"I know."

"No you don't. You don't get it at all."

"...Tch."

"This scene you wrote vacates readers with its utter *lifelessness*."

"...Erm, Senpai."

"Yes?"

"This is totally revenge for just now, right?"

And now it was 5 AM.

The first scenario I ever wrote, seeing the light of day for the first time.

Naturally I expected that it would be viewed unfavorably, but actually being on the receiving end of that criticism was no less shocking of an experience.

"You know I wouldn't do something so petty 80% of the time."

"...And the remaining 20% of the time?"

We were sitting at a narrow table, leaning shoulder to shoulder and gesturing at the small display of a laptop with sentence after sentence piling atop our drawn-out conversation.

Fresh from the bath, the faint fragrance of shampoo lingering on Utaha-senpai's damp hair was almost sexy.

"If it makes you feel better, I might praise you for the volume and speed at which you wrote. In those respects, at least, you truly eclipsed me."

"R-Really?"

"You've really only created a gigantic pile of garbage at the moment, though."

"Ow."

But what she's saying isn't the slightest bit seductive. In fact, it's pretty brutal.

"But it's still meaningful that you've managed to produce that much, Ethics-kun."

"Really?"

"Of course. We can temper any unreadable and irredeemable script, so long as it's there. But you can't fix a script that doesn't exist, naturally."

"I wish you would stop abusing me while trying to sound like you're actually helping me, Senpai!"

But I'm still excited. Aroused.

"When you first began, you were more concerned with writing than thinking. You've made several improvements since then. Know that if you turn back now, nothing will ever be accomplished."

"Mm... I understand."

That undeniably feminine charm... No, not just that—

That novelist's aura, that creator's passion, that teacher's authenticity...

I'm glad I chose to be her disciple, believer and friend.

"So, shall we proceed with take two?"

"Right, what should we fix first?"

"Hmm... Since we're making such good time, let's just scrap everything and start again from scratch."

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?"

So much for that.

The thing about things like motivation and ability is that sometimes, they come back and bite you.

* * *

"It's... still pretty stale."

"Kek."

"And it feels amazingly contrived."

"Ooh."

"The balance is also off. There's a lot of pointless text and not enough in the important parts."

"Aiee..."

Sunday, twelve o'clock, noon.

It's the exact one day anniversary of the first time I began writing those things known as "scenarios."

"Let's move on to the third draft. Starting from the beginning, naturally."

"Yes, ma'am."

I've also been shot down and forced to start over a few times since then, of course.

"...It appears you haven't lost heart yet."

"Well, I don't think I need to start panicking just yet."

"..."

But while I still feel Senpai's judgement is pretty unfair, I haven't yet reached the point of feeling displeasure.

Between gnashing her teeth, tapping her feet, sniggering sporadically and suddenly yelling out in anger, Senpai hasn't so much as paused to catch her breath in the last ten minutes she's been frantically reading my writing.

"...Say, Ethics-kun."

"Yes?"

I opened a new text file and saved it as 「Draft 3」, but Utaha-senpai's eyes were still on the second draft she had already rejected.

"Must it really end this way?"

"Hmm... I guess I didn't develop the story leading up to the conclusion well enough. I could focus more on the main character's thought processes, or perhaps reveal more through his conversations with the heroines..."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm not talking about writing technique this time."

"So..."

Now that I think about it, Senpai's eyes weren't exactly skimming through the paper.

"Do you believe that... that genuinely happy endings like this truly exist?"

Her expression wasn't the expression of a teacher scolding a misbehaving child like it was earlier, either.

"Her past life was a pitiless existence, and in the present, her situation has hardly improved. Her friends and family as well, all ensnared in the same misfortune. She never rids herself of the curse; and will only inherit it in the next life... Even so, you still think those she leaves behind will continue smiling?"

"Utaha-senpai..."

"Well, it was yours truly who conceived that sadistic setting, though."

She had the same look in her eyes as she did back then, the eyes of a *creator*.

That can only mean that Senpai's finally gotten into the scenario I wrote, clumsy as it is, at last.

"Even so... I don't think that's a problem."

「The *Complete Happy Ending*」 – that's what my third True End essentially is.

I've made every effort to keep the story airtight and eliminate anything that feels out of place, but it's ultimately such a drastic shift in perspective that calling it a blasphemy of the entire story preceding it may be unavoidable.

In fact, it's reminiscent of how new writers add questionable "extra" scenarios to console adaptations of PC games, which are always met with swift resistance.

"I'm sorry for saying this, but I don't think Ruri has the right to be happy."

"That's coming from her creator?"

"Her feelings are too strong, and she's hurt Seiji because of them."

"That's hindsight bias."

"It's quite the contrary, actually. She's even willing to harm Meguri and the other heroines in order to win Seiji's heart."

"I guess that makes her one of those yanderes who have been popping up here and there in recent years. I'm still willing to consider her cute, but then again that's only thanks to Utaha-senpai and Erii."

"I still don't think Meguri would be willing to accept that kind of Ruri."

"Well, I think she would. It's Meguri, that's why it'll work."

"...But she doesn't have any lovable qualities."

"That doesn't stop me from liking her."

"Then... Do you like her or Meguri?"

"I love both, *obviously*. The other one is the main heroine we all worked so hard to create, right?"

"That's... not what I'm asking..."

Perhaps amazed at my reckless delusion, Utaha-senpai turned my meaningless question aside with an exasperated expression.

Propping her head on her hand, fuming and looking off to the side, I found Senpai incredibly rude but also a little cute.

"Am I asking for too much?"

"About a hundred books' worth."

"Maybe, but I still want it, though."

"You are *such* a moe pig."

"Don't you want to see it, Senpai?"

"..."

"Don't you want to see a happy ending where Meguri and Ruri compete over Seiji in adorable jealousy; a happy ending where everyone can smile?"

Trying to change Meguri and Ruri, of the same flesh but of two different minds.

Trying to finally bring an end to the appalling tragedy.

It feels like I've added a pretty pointless footnote to the plot.

"Part of me thinks it's impossible, but the another part of me wants to see it happen."

"That makes you no different from Ruri and Meguri."

"..."

I still have to see that scene though.

* * *

"...Well?"

"..."

It's finally half past six PM on Sunday.

Almost time for Sa**e-san Syndrome to take hold around the country.⁴⁹

It also means that our battle is entering its final phase.

"Just saying, but I put all my effort into it."

"..."

Utaha-senpai was busy reading my freshly written third draft on a tablet.

As to why she switched from reading from a laptop to reading from a tablet, well...

"...Utaha-senpai?"

"..."

"Are you all right? You're not going to fall asleep?"

"I'm reading just fine. I still have my wits about me."

"R-Really?"

Unable to sit, Senpai could only read lying down on a bed.

Her fingers would occasionally stop scrolling down on the display, prompting me to call out to her in this manner every few seconds or so. I found it hard to tell if she was in deep concentration or really in deep sleep.

"You *sure* you're OK?"

"..."

But you know, it's not that surprising that she's reached her limit before I have.

Senpai didn't loosen up on supervising my writing despite having her own suicidal amount of corrections to make. Her mind and body have been sprinting at full tilt until now.

"It looks like we're finally running out of time, so why don't you get started on that fourth and final draft for now?"

"..."

⁴⁹ Sazae-san, the longest running animated television series. Broadcast on Fuji Television on Sunday from 6:30 to 7:00 PM.

But now, Senpai's role has just about ended, and my amateurish scenario has once again become the last bottleneck.

"Wow, you really don't pull your punches, Senpai. Well, I'll just-"

"...Ethics-kun."

"I'm sorry, did I affect your concentration?"

Utaha-senpai leisurely powered the tablet down, letting the unlit display cover her face.

With a sigh, she delivered a few conclusive words.

"That's enough. You don't have to say any more."

"...What, was it that bad? Am I supposed to interpret that like it's so bad you're not going to waste time finishing it?"

"No, it means I accept. It means that we don't have to change it anymore."

"Eh..."

Utaha-senpai's irrevocable words, the exact opposite of what I had expected, left me for a moment at a loss for words.

Without waiting for an answer, I had already started to speculate about which portions of the text would ultimately fall short of her standards, and the ways I could fix them.

"Now we only need to fine tune the coding. We don't have voice acting, so we can take as much time as we need."

"...Really?"

I didn't know how to react, now that the end of the revision process had finally come.

"You really mean that? My scenario's actually OK?!"

"I don't think you'd be very pleased if I told you what I truly feel, though."

"?!"

Getting me excited only to pull the rug from under me, Senpai never forgot her author's craft even at this stage.

"But that's a personal problem... Objectively speaking, it's a surprisingly passionate and enjoyable story." And then she did it again when she brought me back up again.

"Ahaha... Huh?"

Finally receiving a passing grade in a slightly roundabout fashion, I suddenly felt my vision blur.

The desktop disappeared from before my eyes, and I thought I caught a glimpse of the bookshelves before they were abruptly replaced by the ceiling.

"Huh?!"

There was a loud thud and I saw stars glimmering in the darkness which consumed me.

...Wow, I must have fallen backward as hard as I could. I hit my head, but it didn't hurt at all.

At the same time, my entire body was bereft of strength and I couldn't stand.

"S-Senpai... I think..."

"Stop it. The battle isn't nearly over yet. If you lose focus now, you won't ever be able to improve⁵⁰."

"O-Oh... really?"

"Yes, just like me."

"...I see."

"It's truly regrettable... Especially now that Ethics-kun is completely defenseless..."

"...You're talking about beating me up, right?"

And so the two of us lay down staring up into the narrow ceiling.

It would certainly feel like something moe out of a galge event CG if we were looking up at a starry night sky, but that's still eclipsed by my fellow otaku sleeping shoulder to shoulder with me.

I have to say that's not too far from the truth.

⁵⁰ A Japanese *triple entendre*. The first, translated literally, is "to stretch one's arms". This is the definition Utaha uses in her next spoken line. The second is, of course, "to get better (at something)." The last is "to increase alcohol tolerance", totally unrelated.

"Well, that aside... Thanks, Utaha-senpai."

"Oh, you don't have to. I had to use my discretion. The content's barely passable, honestly speaking."

KO'd, yet simultaneously claiming victory, it was becoming hard for the both of us to even mumble from sheer satisfaction and fatigue.

"I apologize for being a wet blanket, but there's one last distasteful thing I have to say."

"Yes?"

Willing her mouth to move — the only part of her body that would — Senpai orchestrated a close to the underground school festival.

"This work... won't be credited to Kasumi Utako."

"I... see."

"I'm not the one who made it."

From a certain perspective, that might have been interpreted as a shocking confession.

"Applying your arbitrary judgment, you used the world and characters I created for your own convenient purposes."

"Mmm."

Even so...

In these two days of intense fighting with Utaha-senpai, I've come to understand everything that she's tried to tell me.

"Some of the characters' personalities have changed. So have parts of the setting."

"...Sorry."

We argued, collided, sometimes laid bare our emotions over the content of the script.

She was made to go in directions she didn't want to, but I never really gave her the choice of not following this bulldozing fool.

"Oh no, you don't have to apologize."

"But I ended up bulldozing my own agenda anyway, didn't I?"

Because I really didn't want that broken, distorted piece of work to become "*a new release from the author of 'Metronome in Love'* , Kasumi Utako."

Even though we've now lost one of our game's largest selling points.

But it's still something she has to accept for the sake of her career.

"Because while the world has changed, the characters themselves have changed, too... They still haven't died."

"Eh..."

"They live on. Genuinely crying, laughing, loving... Reading, no, *playing* this game made me very happy indeed. It was fun. And exciting."

In the midst of my grim resignation, I saw Utaha-senpai laughing at me in great amusement.

"The story takes place in Kasumi Utako's universe, but it's written by Aki Tomoya."

No, not laughing at me, but...

"It's the perfect original scenario you and I and nobody else wrote... Not alone, but *together*."

According the greatest form of love onto her disciple, bestowing blessings upon my debut.

Oh how sweet it is, master...

"So Ethics-kun, how about this?"

Utaha-senpai mouthed a single penname.

It wasn't *Kasumi Utako* or *Kasumigaoka Utaha*, but the name of a scenario writer nobody had ever heard of.

"...Are you sure? About that name?"

"As long as you are."

"Well, I'm... not sure if I'm afraid or honored or..."

"So it's decided then. I won't allow any more changes, okay Ethics-kun...?"

Whispering into my ear, Utaha-senpai gently took my hand.⁵¹

⁵¹ See Volume 5, Color Illustrations. There's a slight difference though.

CHAPTER 5.5 – PLEASE READ THIS BETWEEN CHAPTER 5 AND 6 THE SECOND TIME AROUND – MARUTO⁵²

The first day of the school festival, 10 AM...

"I'm sorry for calling you out here (the AV room) so early in the morning, Kasumigaoka-senpai."

"...It's fine, I'm only planning on watching the Drama Club's performance this afternoon anyway."

"Oh, I see. By the way, I heard that the scriptwriter-"

"More importantly, you had business with me, Katou-san?"

"Well, it's... not something I can talk about very easily."

"Oh, so now you're playing the hesitating, introverted character?"

"You're so quick to turn cold, Senpai."

"If you have something to say, then say it. And keep it quick. I'm pretty busy myself, you know."

"Strange, I thought you said you only had plans for this afternoon."

"..."

"...Erm, anyway."

"Just the important parts."

"I think Aki-kun's going to talk to you today. Probably."

⁵² If you don't know who this is, look at the damn cover.

"And that means..."

"Yes, about the scenario. About whether he's chosen the first or second script."

"I... see."

"I imagine he's trying his hardest to look around for Senpai now. But that's nothing more than a wild goose chase, now that you're here."

"You're so quick to turn cold, aren't you?"

"So, about Aki-kun's answer."

"I'll hear it from the concerned party himself. I don't need you to tell me."

"Yes, but... I think it's something that might cause a lot of... *trouble* later on."

"...Meaning?"

"That's, erm, not something I can tell you face to face..."

"I stand corrected. I see you're aiming to be a certain irritating, bespectacled character instead."

"Erm, I'm just going to apologize in advance. I'm sorry, Kasumigaoka-senpai."

"...Why would you need to apologize?"

"That's, because, you know..."

"Look, why are you intervening in a problem that involves *only* Ethics-kun and myself?"

"Ah, I guess it really was a personal problem after all. As for which scenario was better, I suppose they were both made for good reason."

"..."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did I upset you?"

"...Yes, I wonder who's been intentionally provoking me all this time."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean... Oh well, I'll just cut to the chase."

"Haven't I been telling you to do that from the start?"

"Well, Aki-kun's been... *thinking outside the box.*"

"...Eh?"

"His answer's probably completely different from the kind Kasumigaoka-senpai is expecting."

"..."

"Oh, but please don't get angry when Aki-kun eventually talks to you. He's troubled over it for a week. Even if it's nothing like what Senpai expected... I hope Senpai will still appreciate all his pointless effort, if nothing else. That's all I wanted to say."

EPILOGUE

The campus, long waiting expectantly for nightfall, was filled with the sounds of laughter and speaker music that invoked mild feelings of nostalgia.

Finally back at Toyogasaki Academy after those 48 hours of revising the scenario, I found the three day school festival finally at its climax – the late-night festival.

Looking up at the surrounding buildings, I saw they were all dark and empty – but right in the middle of the grounds, a red bonfire burned with all the students outside clustered thickly around it.

Despite the towering safety and environmental challenges posed by such an event, the school festival committee worked some unknown magic to keep this good old tradition alive.

...But of course that "good" part only applies to the more popular demographic of the school.

As proof, only couples dancing to their hearts' content could be found gathering around the fire, as their less stylish counterparts surely wished they would catch fire and burn as they looked on.

Oh, and nobody's sure how it started, but for as long as I can remember, it's been the girl who asks her desired partner to the folk dance at Toyogasaki.

It rivals reverse-patterned school excursions' ability in the creation of couples, and would certainly make an old matchmaking woman smile.

"...Yo."

"...Yo."

In a corner of the campus, a short distance away from the fire:

Partnerless boys and girls were having fun in their own groups, and there was even a lone harmonica player, trilling his instrument as he stared forlornly at the fire. Meanwhile, I stood in front a girl sitting on a bench with her sketchbook spread out in front of her.

"I'm surprised you can draw in this darkness with those myopic eyes."

"I'm fine so long as I can see the scenery. I don't need to see my hands to know how the art will turn out."

"...Wow, I don't think I'll ever get to feel that way."

In Eriri's sketchbook, a bonfire burned as if it was alive.

Those ignorant of her true identity might mistake her drawing for a landscape piece produced for the Art Club, when in reality, it's a background sketch for a doujin galge.

"Did you enjoy the festival?"

"I'm surprised the director who spent the last two days stuck in his house adding to the scenario and dramatically increasing my workload can still ask me that question."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Looks like while we were in the middle of our bloodbath, a similarly intense battle had taken place.

"My God, you've been throwing these kinds of questions at me since just now! *'Why didn't you enter the Miss Toyogasaki pageant this year'*, hmm?"

"Well, I'm not going to apologize for that. I bet even you're glad now that you've got a great excuse for missing it."

"Even if I feel that way, that isn't something I can just go around telling people, right?"

"Nobody ever said you had to keep your hobbies a secret."

"...Well, in the first place, you're already breaking a huge rule by talking to me in front of so many people."

"In tonight's circumstances, our meeting will be but a legend."

With the practice of girls asking boys out in effect for the day, Eriri's usual followers were nowhere to be found.

Though I could feel the sporadic male inquisitive glances coming from afar, there was really no reason to be worried about this pathetically moe pairing of 2D otaku (real) and golden-haired twintailed lady (fake).

"...Anyway, where's Kasumigaoka Utaha? Haven't you two been together for the past two days?"

"Just saying, but nothing happened between us, okay?"

"Oh, I know. It's not as if that supremely lazy sweet-talking bitch could do anything even if she wanted to."

"...Wow, you never change, do you? And you know we're not like that. We're bonded by the same passion, mind, and resplendent love between *master and disciple*. It's not something you would understand."

"...I don't think she wants to understand that either."

"Anyway, Utaha-senpai's over there."

I gestured away from us in the direction of the courtyard as I spoke.

"She's got stuff to talk about with Katou, apparently."

* * *

"Oh, so you two decided on fixing it *that way*... Anyway, thanks for the hard work, Kasumigaoka-senpai."

"I still don't understand half of what you're saying. I'm just going to ignore anything weird you say."

"Erm, then, you know..."

"What?"

"Did Senpai's, erm, '*real problem*' work itself out?"

"Of course not. I've had my hands full working on the scenario."

"...Erm, I'm not sure what to say about that..."

"Then I would appreciate it if you say nothing at all. It'll only upset me if you do."

"Ah,ahaha... But... I think that's mostly karma coming around to get you, Senpai."

"What's... that supposed to mean?"

"Kasumigaoka-senpai, you treasure Aki-kun *too much*."

"..."

"You treasure him to the extent where you place him above everybody else... If you're wondering, running from Tamasaki to Waai City out of the blue was a good example."⁵³

"I see... Perhaps I'm just another '*Ruri*' after all."

"Erm, which means?"

"No matter how much I treasure him... Whether it's as a younger sister, a source of inspiration, his master – I'm always treated as someone special by him, but never as his *equal*."

"So the route Kasumigaoka-senpai wanted to choose was..."

"Say Katou-san, do you know the story about the jewel box of memories and the toolbox waiting on hand?"⁵⁴

"Sorry, I don't. Besides, that isn't a very common reference, is it?"

"...I wonder about that."

"By the way, I have one last weird thing to say, will you listen?"

"Yes?"

"Ruri's... just another Sayuka in the end, isn't she?"

"Katou-san..."

"I apologize if I'm wrong, but I've read 「Metronome in Love」 twice."

"...I see."

"While they're completely unlike each other visually, there's something about the way they think and act... that makes it seem as if Sayuka's the *real* incarnation of Ruri."

"You might have been the first to realize that."

"That's... well, only because other people don't know about Ruri yet."

"But my greatest fan hasn't caught on to it."

⁵³ See Volume 2, Chapter 5 and 6, or alternatively hotel scene episode (again).

⁵⁴ Ultra-obscure reference to the VN Chocolat ~Maid Café "Curio"~, scenario writer being one Fumiaki Maruto. At least he's self-aware. Apparently Katou's the toolbox and Utaha's the jewel box, but none of that means anything to any of us mirite?

"Ah,ahaha..."

"Sayuka was the first character I ever brought to life."

"You're talking about your debut."

"Back then, I was clumsy, I didn't have any experience building characters... And I wasn't very good at socializing, either."

"*Back then*', huh?"

"I didn't know anything about other girls. So I could only start from the person closest to me – myself."

"Kasumigaoka-senpai..."

"That's why... That's why this time I wanted Ruri to win."

"I wanted Sayuka to win then too."

* * *

"So is the scenario finally finished this time around?"

"Yes, but..."

Indifferent to the clamor ahead, Eriri's pencil was still flying across the paper at incredible speeds.

"But what?"

"I can't vouch for the content. I had a hand in writing it, after all."

Dancing mobs... erm, students, as well as the protagonist and heroine had been added to the schoolyard and bonfire in the book, turning the sketch into an event CG in the blink of an eye.

"Oh, I'll bet it's a *magnus opus* of horrid writing. I'll also bet it's about heroines with all sorts of moe appeal conveniently falling in love with the kind of ridiculously perfect and strong main character that makes otaku everywhere happy. Then they fight the big bad boss, win and everybody gets their lovey-dovey happy ending, right?"

"...You haven't read my scenario yet, by any chance?"

"I haven't, but I've seen enough of what's inside of that head of yours."

It's true that I like those kinds of developments, but I could almost feel Eriri's words hit me one by one.

I've been seeing what goes on in *your* head for a long time too.

"Either way, I can't deny that I might have ruined the sophistication of Utaha-senpai's work just a little."

Equally vindictive, with hobbies and taste disconcertingly similar.

Both distinguished prodigies, their style and philosophy frighteningly different.

In this world, they're two of a kind.

"But still..."

"Hmm?"

"The new scenario's a lot more workable than the old one."

"Ah."

"We've got a much better chance of beating 「rouge en rouge」 and Hashima Izumi now."

Part of me really wanted to question the point of competing in the first place, though.

Question the idea that their rivalry should really matter at all, and question whether they should focus instead on producing art that would satisfy themselves.

These arguments swirled in my head as a result of my newly acquired wisdom.

"...Yeah."

But if that's the ultimate source of Eriri's, and on the flip side, Izumi-chan's motivation, then...

"Then it shouldn't be a problem. No matter how much you've debased Kasumigaoka Utaha."

"No, that's..."

Doesn't that make us irreconcilable enemies too, lori?

"That's not something I can pretend I didn't hear, Sawamura-san."

"That's not something I plan to take back either."

"When did you..."

I'm no longer sure if the strong communication between members of 「blessing software」 is a good thing or a bad thing.

We turned our backs to find Utaha-senpai suddenly there, assailing Eriri with her usual beautifully icy voice, agitation from sleep deprivation miraculously sealed off without a trace.

"Anyway, it's not like *my* writing grows soft nor my reputation sullied when something a little foreign is mixed in."

"Oh, you don't have to force yourself, you know? You can always blame it on your co-writers if it doesn't sell. We all know *that's* the true secret to success in scenario writing."

"Oh, but we can't shift all the blame onto Ethics-kun. Especially since I've now used up all my energy and willpower opening new possibilities for him."

"You mean you helped me make my writer's debut! Don't use ambiguous expressions like that!"

* * *

"Sigh..."

With those two entrenched in a no-holds-barred verbal conflict in no time at all, I made my escape as soon as I could.

But like a moth drawn to a flame, I literally found myself fleeing towards the fire.

The domain of the socially mobile – the revolving wheel of the folk dance.

"Onii-sama."

The discomfort I felt here was comparable to at the warzone earlier, as I slowly threaded my way through the transient gaps, taking extra care not to bump into anybody.

"Onii-sama..."

At any rate, I have to get out of here as soon as possible.

I'm bothering the other students, but more importantly, I'm in a great predicament myself.

"Ooh... I said Onii-sama!"

"Eh?"

Just then.

I reacted reflexively to that voice originating from outside my consciousness.

No matter how much I think about it, "Onii-sama" isn't something I'm used to being called.

No matter how many boxes that one word checks off in the checklist of arousal, I still wouldn't make the mistake of thinking that voice is calling me. Usually.

However.

「You're horrible, Onii-sama...」



An unknown girl stood there alone, looking unmistakably straight at me.

A mysterious girl with lustrous long black hair, flowing naturally in all its fleeting beauty.

"...Ruri?"

No, it wasn't her.

That name and that figure resonated faintly in the depths of my memory.

It must have been in the visuals, the materials, somewhere in the 2D data...

"I've always been calling out to you... for years, decades, forever and ever..."

Hinoe Ruri.

Back in the present world, borrowing Meguri's body to regain her lost love and life, she's a slightly... well, very yandere little sister with a brother complex.

"But, but now I'm... Seiji."

And starring in that role was Kanou Meguri... also known as Katou Megumi.

"...I'm so happy, Onii-sama."

"..."

A short distance removed from the bright light of the campfire.

"At last, I can touch Onii-sama again. I can feel the weight of Onii-sama's hand pressing against mine again."

"Erm..."

Dancing awkwardly and trying to avoid others at the same time, the two of us drew mild curiosity from the sidelines.

"Being able to do that alone... No, being able to do something so *extravagant* makes Ruri so, so, so happy..."

"Look, Katou, I..."

"This won't do, Aki-kun. We have to act it out properly till the end, or else the scriptwriter will get angry, you know?"

"So it was her doing after all..."

The spectators included a golden haired girl sitting on a bench in the distance, directing the full force of her hatred and displeasure over here as she ran her pencil ragged over her sketchbook.

And next to her, extremely pleased yet regretful, cheering yet cursing under her breath – a black haired girl with an incongruent expression.

"To be Ruri, to be *this way* at least for today... That's what Senpai entrusted me to do."

I'm no stranger to the feeling of wanting something with all your heart.

"I want you to let her rest in peace. To answer her feelings."

Right now, every aspect of Katou is *Ruri*.

That yandere, pampered, yet incredibly cute and loving little sister.

At this point, I'm no longer sure if Eriri's artistic skill is that amazing, or if it's really Katou who's an extraordinary bishoujo in her own right.

"So Aki-kun, won't you be Seiji, who regains his memories and falls in love with Ruri, for today at least?"

"Won't there be rumors spreading around tomorrow if we do that?"

Another hairstyle change.

And the "legendary" couple at the folk dance.

"It'll be alright, since it's the both of us."

"...You've become pretty accustomed to self-abasement, Katou."

The conversation was of the same crude variety, even as we neared the climax of such an important flag.

Our hands were still locked.

Somehow, I found us naturally pulling closer together.

* * *

"TAKI UTAKO?!"

"Don't you think it's a great name?"

"Hold on a minute, Kasumigaoka Utaha... You're *serious*?"

"Why not? It's just a joint penname we're using for this game."

"...I find it hard to believe that you're taking this so lightly. You can at least *try* to act stubborn."

"I'm not taking that from the person who's been pulling people along with her since the first grade."

"Oh, I don't know about you, but I don't console myself with such pathetic delusions."

"That's why I'm saying it's just a penname. It's not like I had any mentally unsound thoughts about binding us as creators and authors together, never to part, while I created it."

"Oh, you did. You thought about it long and hard, didn't you?!"

"Well, that aside, 'our' job is now finished."

"There was no need for the emphasis on that plural. *Tomoya* still has plenty of work to do."

"All that's left is your art... The last and toughest battle."

"...I know."

"We drew out the scenario about as late as we could. I apologize wholeheartedly for all the trouble we've caused on that front."

"Well, it's not like I was delayed by you, so..."

"But if we've worsened our story... That isn't something so easily forgiven."

"...I've already prepared myself for that. I don't need you to tell me."

"Well then, I suppose I'll be going."

"You're going home?"

"What are you talking about? Isn't the school festival just getting started?"

"But there's only the late-night fes- Wait, what?"

"That's right, I'm going to dance with Ethics-kun now. It's almost time for me to switch with Katou-san."

"Wha-?!"

"That was my plan all along. Why else would I drag my tired body all the way back to school?"

"N-Now just wait a minute! Kasumigaoka Utaha!"

"Are you going to dance after me, then? I don't think Ethics-kun would refuse, you know?"

"..."

"But I guess there's no chance of that happening since you've built that wall of lies for yourself."

"..."

"You know, Sawamura-san, before you're tied down... You should do really something about it."

"..."

"Well then... *Good luck, Sawamura Eriri.*"

* * *

"I won't lose..."

"I won't lose to anybody..."

"...*sob*"



AFTERWORD

Sup, it's Maruto.

Thanks for picking up Volume 5 of 「How to Raise a Boring Girlfriend」 .

I haven't read it yet, but I'm already congratulating myself knowing you grabbed this book instinctively after seeing only the cover. Don't worry, I sighed instinctively too when I first got the draft covers for this volume.

As those of you who have been pursuing this series since Volume 1 might have already guessed, as of this volume, we're entering the second rotation of the cover heroines.

Removing Katou, who was to make her first appearance this time around, and even overtaking Eiringo⁵⁵... I mean Eriri from Volume 1 is Utaha-senpai, bludgeoning her way to the top in this second round of intense battle. It was actually my doing, of course.

We've come back to Utaha-senpai, this time in all her genuine and perfect flawlessness... Right?

This feeling of throwing out all the equipment (in more ways than one) in this second run-around was the result of decisions made by our illustrator, Misaki-san, and the recklessness... I mean, the *judgement* of Hagiwara-san at editing, all while I watched attentively and excitedly from the opposite side of the mosquito net.

As an author, I can always make distasteful plans for extending the shelf life of my harem rom-com by creating many heroines of equal popularity, or by rotating four different heroines twice around so I can stretch my series out to eight volumes, but it's already gotten to the point where it's no longer up to me

to decide where my work goes, as the combined political might of my illustrator, editor, and of course, all my readers out there, grows with a vengeance.

But seriously, as to who will be the winner at the very end... as to whatever conclusion we're heading to, I'm beginning to fear ever ending this work because of all the uproar that might follow. For those of you acquainted with my past works, I would really appreciate you leaving whatever snide comments you might have unsaid.

Still, to someone long familiar with the cooperative enterprise of game creation, the fact that so many want to participate actively in the creation of this work, want to combine our powers to bring something to life, is a more enjoyable side to this that I can't ignore.

At any rate, it feels like I've been going drinking with a lot of different people recently. And they always talk business first before taking my drinking mon- (omitted)

And now, a little something regarding the content of Volume 5.

If there are any readers out there who actually read this book seriously (I like throwing sarcastic insults at myself), you probably thought this book was a repeat of the events in Volume 2.

While I really want to tell you that it's true that they're always going in circles and never really making any progress (So make them do something already!), I'd like to think that Ethics-kun has since grown just a little as a creator while Utaha-senpai's laziness has gotten a lot better, and I'll be happy if you feel the same way too. But you just can't seem to raise any flags, can you, Senpai?

And so, up next is Volume 6.

I'd initially intended to jump abruptly to Winter Comiket at the epilogue of this volume if our project folded, but thankfully we've since arrived at this point without a hitch.

With the game completed, the battle joined, and a showdown between rivals looming, we're finally approaching the climax of the story.

In the story and on the advertising front (I hope), something big is about to happen.

It appears that playing the central role in this super-important sixth volume will be that girl who made her spectacular debut on the cover of Volume 1 – that mediocre papier-mâché heroine who everybody has been lukewarm about – Sawamura Spencer Eriri.

⁵⁵ Ringo = Apple, a play of words on Eriri's name. A is for Apple and Eriri was on the cover of Volume 1, so "Eiringo". One of Maruto's lamer jokes.

Manipulating everybody's eyes onto the rebirth of this template golden haired twintail (mostly the work of the illustrator and editor)... Wait, I mean, I believe we tried our hardest to shake our readers' emotions to the core.

Eh? What about Katou? ...Well, she always gets the juiciest parts in every volume somehow, so aren't we just fine this way?

And at last, we come to the usual acknowledgements.

...I realize this is becoming stale, especially since we already said hi to the two of them earlier.

And so, Misaki-san and Hagiwara-san, let's continue working hard together.

See you again in Volume 6, territory even Kasumi Utako can't touch.

2013, the season of W*ite Al**m⁵⁶

Maruto Fumiaki

⁵⁶ The anime adaptation of White Album 2 aired between October 5 and December 28, 2013. You can't help but remind us even in the Afterword, can you, Maruto?